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Allegiances

SunClan

Leader: Adderstar—huge tabby tom with slanted amber eyes and a long tail
Deputy: Beestripe—light gray tom with darker gray stripes and yellow eyes
Medicine Cat: Grayleaf—pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and blue eyes

Warriors:
Cherryfur—ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes
(Apprentice: Shadowpaw)
Quickstorm—lean light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes and long legs; Rosekit and Dawnkit's father
Ebonypelt—thick-furred dark gray she-cat with ice-blue eyes; Nightpaw's mother
Harefoot—big dark brown tom with dark amber eyes
Pineclaw—reddish-brown tabby tom with pale amber eyes
Hazelfrost—brown tabby she-cat with ice-blue eyes
Forestfire—dark ginger she-cat with white patches and green eyes
Thrushtail—large light brown tabby tom with pale yellow eyes; Quickstorm's brother
(Apprentice: Nightpaw)
Shinefur—pretty silver tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes; Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw's mother
Duskheart—mottled dark brown tom with amber eyes; Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw's father
Willowstripe—pale gray she-cat with dark blue eyes; Shinefur's sister
Juniperfur—dark blue-gray tom with amber eyes; Nightpaw's father
Thumpstep—big dark brown tabby tom with pale yellow eyes
(Apprentice: Minnowpaw)
Deerdapple—light brown she-cat with white freckles and amber eyes
Birchpelt—pale ginger tabby tom with blue eyes; father of

Rainfoot's kits
Robinfeather—dark brown, almost black tabby tom with green eyes

Apprentices:
Shadowpaw—smoky gray tom with amber eyes
Minnowpaw—silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes
Nightpaw—solid black tom with icy blue eyes

Queens and Kits:
Patchflower—long-furred tortoiseshell-and-white queen with round green eyes
Rosekit—dark tortoiseshell she-kit with round green eyes; Patchflower's daughter
Dawnkit—cream-and-white she-kit with amber eyes; Patchflower's daughter
Rainfoot—dark gray tabby queen with golden eyes; expecting kits

Elders:
Brokenstem—tabby tom with pale amber eyes and a long tail with a kink in the center
Ashwhisker—smoky gray she-cat with a silver-tinged muzzle, a shredded ear, and yellow eyes
Fernstripe—dark tabby she-cat with green eyes

FireClan

Leader: Amberstar—pale ginger tabby she-cat with slanted dark amber eyes
Deputy: Hawkfeather—mottled dark brown tom with yellow eyes
Medicine Cat: Pineshadow—lithe reddish-brown tom with dark blue eyes

Warriors:
Brightpetal—golden tabby she-cat with dark brown eyes
Shadetail—solid black tom with amber eyes; Lightstripe's brother (Apprentice: Sootpaw)
Patchwhisker—white tom with brown splotches and amber eyes
Cinderlight—fluffy, mottled gray she-cat with bright green eyes
Lightstripe—pale gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes; Shadetail's sister
Darkfall—marbled tabby tom with green eyes

Maplefang—mottled dark ginger she-cat with amber eyes
Larkpelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with white paws and amber eyes

Apprentices:
Sootpaw—mottled dark brown tabby tom with golden eyes

MoonClan

Leader: Juniperstar—blue-gray she-cat with dark blue eyes
Medicine Cat: Leafstripe—pretty tabby she-cat with round golden eyes

Warriors:
Hollyfrost—fluffy dark gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes
Bluecloud—beautiful blue tortoiseshell she-cat with dark amber eyes; Skypaw and Lightpaw's mother
Darkstep—tabby tom with a distinct black marbled pattern and pale green eyes
(Apprentice: Lightpaw)
Ryetail—long-haired black tom with a plumed tail and golden eyes
(Apprentice: Skypaw)
Cloudydawn—fluffy dark cream she-cat with dark amber eyes
Quailclaw—dark brown tabby tom with white-tipped paws, ears, and tail, and green eyes; Skypaw and Lightpaw's father
Goldenfur—ginger tom with pale green eyes; father of Spotheart's kits

Apprentices:
Lightpaw—brown-and-white she-cat with amber eyes
Skypaw—light blue-gray tom with amber eyes

Queens and Kits:
Spotheart—mottled gray tabby queen with blue eyes
Yellowkit—ginger tom-kit with blue eyes; Spotheart's son
Mallowkit—dark gray tabby she-kit with green eyes; Spotheart's daughter
Icekit—pale gray tabby she-kit with dark green eyes; Spotheart's daughter

WaterClan

Leader: Troutstar—gray-and-white speckled tom with green eyes
Deputy: Ripplewhisper—dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes
Medicine Cat: Palefeather—long-furred white tom with blue eyes

Warriors:
Dovemoon—gray she-cat with white splotches and dark blue eyes
Snowhawk—huge white tom with amber eyes; Gorsepaw, Duskpaw, and Willowpaw's father
Silverheart—mottled silver tabby she-cat with green eyes; Heronflight's sister
(Apprentice: Duskpaw)
Reedfoot—brown tabby tom with white paws and dark blue eyes
(Apprentice: Willowpaw)
Mossfur—light tabby tom with green eyes
(Apprentice: Gorsepaw)
Berrystripe—small, dark blue-gray tabby she-cat with ice-blue eyes
Heronflight—lithe gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes; Gorsepaw, Duskpaw, and Willowpaw's mother

Apprentices:
Gorsepaw—dark ginger tom with bright yellow eyes
Willowpaw—dark gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes
Duskpaw—dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

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Prologue

A soft breeze created ripples in the small, clear pool at the center of the little clearing. The clumps of ferns shivered at the gust, the soft murmur seeming to echo in the eerie silence. But one bush was trembling much more visibly than the rest, and it parted to reveal a massive golden cat, his plumed tail swaying rhythmically as if it too was moved by the wind.

The cat trotted silently to the pool, crouching beside it and wrapping his tail neatly around his paws. His strikingly blue eyes gazed intently into the water.

His ear swiveled to catch the loud rustling of another approaching cat. He didn't have to look; the familiar scent of the newcomer wafted over him, and he flicked his tail in greeting.

"Hello, Willowstar," the golden tom meowed.

Willowstar stalked over to settle beside him. "Greetings," she replied.

Glancing sideways at her companion, she noticed his shape was even fainter than yesterday. She could see straight through his glittering pelt to the trees and undergrowth on his other side.

"You are becoming nothing more than a shadow, Sunstar," she murmured sadly. "All of StarClan will miss you greatly when you are gone forever."

Sunstar heaved a sigh. "I have watched over my Clan, and the other three, for more seasons than any cat can count. Perhaps it is good for me to finally fade; even in StarClan I feel old and frail."

"You must not speak like that!" Willowstar mewed in astonishment. "No cat can deny that you have lived in StarClan for such a long time. But you cannot just give up and let yourself fade. SunClan still needs their very first leader to watch over them."

"SunClan has hundreds more ancestors to guide their pawsteps," Sunstar rumbled calmly. "I can trust them to keep my cats safe for all the moons to come."

"Oh, Sunstar." Willowstar pressed herself to her old friend's flank, feeling his fur brush hers despite it being nearly invisible. "Your loyalty to your Clan has not faltered at all, even after all this time. You have the heart of a true warrior."

Sunstar rasped his tongue over Willowstar's ear in a friendly gesture. "As do you," he meowed. "You may not have been your Clan's first leader, but no cat could ever question your loyalty to MoonClan."

"Thank you," the pale gray she-cat responded, dipping her head humbly. "It is an honor to have known you in StarClan. I only wish Moonstar had stayed long enough for me to meet her. I have heard of how noble she was."

"Moonstar was indeed a great leader," Sunstar murmured, his eyes clouding with memories. "I still remember her, to this day. It was a sad day when she faded at last."

"And it will be a sad day when you fade away too," Willowstar replied.

"It happens to every spirit eventually. As the cat's name and deeds become fainter, so does the cat itself. But I am not offended that SunClan has forgotten me. It is only—"

Suddenly the golden tom sprang to his paws, his fur bristling and his eyes fixed on the water. Willowstar remained still and silent, knowing he was seeing the future for his Clan and that she should not interfere with the vision. Yet her pelt prickled like ants were crawling through it as she waited for Sunstar to come out of his trance.

"No, no..." he whispered hoarsely, his eyes like two blue moons. Willowstar could just barely hear him, and fear dropped like a cold stone in her belly.

But suddenly the old leader's stiff body relaxed, and he blinked slowly. "I see..."

"Sunstar?" Willowstar meowed hesitantly. "What have you foreseen?"

"There shall be great danger soon, and my Clan will have to face it," Sunstar growled. "But I have seen the future of one cat, young but undyingly loyal to SunClan all the same. It is this cat's destiny to save the Clan from the coming peril."

Straightening up determinedly, he padded toward the fern bush he had pushed through to enter the clearing before.

"I have one last duty to perform before I leave StarClan. One last message to pass on to the living SunClan, so that they are prepared for the danger that approaches."

Willowstar watched as he slipped through the ferns without making a sound, and the shadows of the forest beyond swallowed him up.

Chapter 1

Rosekit lashed her tail with anticipation, peering at her target through a thick shield of mint leaves. She was hiding in the mint bush that grew up against the camp wall farthest from the camp entrance, knowing the strong scent would hide her own. And for all the leaves on the bush, the little she-kit could still easily slip through all of them.

She wriggled her haunches in excitement, waiting for just the right moment to pounce on her target. It was crouched on the dusty ground, gazing at a clump of leaves wet with morning dew. It had no idea Rosekit was merely tail-lengths away.

Perfect!

Drawing her weight into her hind legs, Rosekit shrank back, then sprang with enough force to launch herself right out of the bush and square onto her target's back.

"What in the—*woah!* Rosekit! Get off me, you great lump!"

Rosekit purred with laughter—her target had been her sister, Dawnkit, who obviously had no clue she had been in the mint bush the whole time. She scrambled off her sister's back and watched her shake the dust from her cream-colored fur.

"Surprised you, didn't I?" Rosekit mewed smugly.

"What did it sound like?" Dawnkit rolled her eyes good-humoredly. "I'm sure half the Clan will be racing over, wondering what happened."

Rosekit purred again. "What are you doing anyway, staring at those leaves? I don't see any beetles to catch over here."

Dawnkit shrugged. "The dew always sparkles as the sun rises. It's really pretty, so I like to watch the colors some mornings."

Rosekit gave her littermate a weird look. "Alright," she replied. "I'll be the greatest warrior SunClan has ever seen, and you can stay over here leaf-gazing." She grunted, trying to mimic the elders on their grumpy days. "Lazy furball."

"I'll show you lazy!" Dawnkit cuffed her sister around the ear, then took Rosekit by surprise by springing at her with all four paws outstretched. The pair wrestled playfully, rolling over each other and sending up clouds of dust in their wake.

Suddenly the kits crashed right into something, sending them flying apart. Rosekit stumbled to her paws, looked up, and found herself staring straight into the eyes of her father, Quickstorm.

Thank StarClan it wasn't any other cat, Rosekit thought with relief. *They would've made crowfood of us!*

Quickstorm was a lean light brown tabby with long legs and big golden eyes that caught the sun's rays in their depths. He looked sternly down at Rosekit and Dawnkit, though Rosekit thought she could see traces of amusement in his eyes.

"Be careful!" he meowed. "You'll be apprentices soon, and no cat will want to be your mentor if you get under every cat's paws."

Rosekit gave her chest a few embarrassed licks, while Dawnkit muttered, "Sorry, Quickstorm."

"Oh, don't be too hard on them." The sisters brightened at the mew of Patchflower, their mother and Quickstorm's beloved mate. Her long tortoiseshell-and-white fur rippled in the wind, and her brilliant green eyes were warm.

"Most kits are bundles of energy when they're nearly six moons," the queen reasoned. She flicked her tail over her kits' ears, adding, "These two aren't much different."

"Yes, soon you'll be putting your energy into becoming outstanding warriors!" Quickstorm purred eagerly.

Rosekit imagined endless hunting patrols with her fellow Clanmates by her side; fighting as a Clan to defend her territory from any

threat; Gatherings and meeting cats from the different Clans. How exciting the warrior life would be! She gave a little bounce at the thought of it.

But Rosekit glanced at her sister to find her shuffling her tiny paws uncomfortably. "There's more to Clan life than just being a warrior," Dawnkit murmured, her pale yellow eyes gazing into the distance. Rosekit followed her gaze and found herself staring at the medicine cat den.

She almost gasped aloud. Could her littermate be considering becoming a *medicine cat* apprentice?

She glanced back up at her parents, wondering if they too suspected Dawnkit would be a medicine cat. She didn't want to talk to her sister about it in front of them.

"Oh, right!" she mewed, thinking quickly. "Dawnkit, I found a super cool hiding spot behind the elders den. Come and see!"

She bounded away, ignoring the questioning look Dawnkit gave her.

Rosekit slid to a halt, panting, beside the elders den, and waited impatiently for Dawnkit to catch up. As soon as she came within earshot, she hissed, "Do you really want to become a medicine cat instead of a warrior?"

Dawnkit glanced away. "I'm almost sure of it," she meowed, her voice shaky but firm. "I want to help my Clanmates in a way that doesn't involve clawing cats' fur off. It just feels too harsh for me."

"But the whole *concept* of life in the forest is that it's harsh!" Rosekit protested in confusion. "You can't deny that, even if you're a medicine cat. Ask Grayleaf; she's the medicine cat, and I bet she would tell you the exact same thing!"

Dawnkit stared at the ground, as if she thought it would swallow her up and save her from Rosekit's questions.

"I know," she murmured at last. "That's why I want to be a medicine cat, so I can help keep my Clanmates alive for as long as they live

such a hard life." Straightening up, she mewed firmly, "I'll learn the use of every healing herb, and I'll share tongues with StarClan and hear what they ask of me. I'll be the best medicine cat ever!"

Rosekit weaved around her sister happily, relieved that her sister had still not lost her fierce spirit. "If that's what you really want, I can't stop you," she responded. "I just wish we could still train together. It won't be the same now."

Dawnkit licked Rosekit's ear. "We may not get to train together, but I'll always be your sister," she mewed. "Don't forget that, you daft furball!"

Rosekit couldn't suppress a *mrrow* of laughter. "I'll remember."

Dawnkit stretched luxuriously and turned toward the medicine cat den. "I'm going to see if Grayleaf needs any extra help. It doesn't hurt to prepare myself before I'm apprenticed!"

"You're right," Rosekit replied. "I'm going to look for the apprentices and see if they'll teach me anything!" She flicked her tail to Dawnkit in farewell and scampered away.

She knew that, just before sunhigh, most or all of the apprentices would be out hunting or training. Kits weren't allowed outside the camp until they were apprenticed—Rosekit hated that rule, but knew better than to disobey—so her only hope was that one or two apprentices were still in camp.

Rosekit crept over to the apprentice den and peeked inside. It was cool and dim inside, and she had to blink several times before her eyes adjusted to the light. Looking around, she couldn't see any of the apprentices, and felt a pang of disappointment. "Mouse dung," she muttered.

"What are you doing?"

Rosekit nearly sprang into the air in surprise. She spun around, and recognized the solid black pelt of Nightpaw, the youngest of the apprentices. His eyes, which were pale blue and as round as an owl's, were fixed curiously on her.

Uh oh. I'm not really supposed to be here.

"Er, I was looking for an apprentice," she stammered. "I was bored, and Dawnkit is helping Grayleaf in the medicine den. I wanted to practice the hunting crouch...or something."

Nightpaw's ear twitched. "Well, I'm here now," he offered. "I wrenched a claw during battle training and got sent back to camp, but I'm not useless."

Rosekit's eyes widened eagerly. "So you'll help me practice?"

"Sure. We can get started now." Nightpaw's eyes glowed warmly—*this must feel like having his own apprentice,* Rosekit realized.

"Okay, start by getting low to the ground. Bend your legs." Nightpaw crouched as an example. Rosekit studied his position carefully, then copied it as well as she could.

"Like this?"

"Very good, for your first try." Rosekit's tail lashed with excitement, and he added, "Just remember to keep your tail straight and still. In the forest there are leaves all over the ground, and one sweep of your tail would make them rustle loud enough to scare away most of the prey around you."

Rosekit obeyed, stiffening her tail and keeping it down.

"Good, good..." Nightpaw paced around her. "Alright, your crouch is great now. Here comes the hard part: stalking."

"I'm ready to learn!" Rosekit meowed. Nightpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement.

"Now, pretend that twig over there—" He gestured with his tail, "—is a mouse. Learning to stalk one is a little difficult, because they can feel your pawsteps through the ground if you don't step light enough."

Rosekit nodded hard, hanging on every word.

"Start stalking towards the mouse," Nightpaw mewed encouragingly. "Remember: tail down, paws light."

At his word, she began creeping forward slowly, focusing hard on shifting her weight to her other three paws when she stepped with one. But after a couple pawsteps she lost her balance. She waved her tail in a feeble struggle for balance, and ended up falling over on her side.

Fox dung! she cursed herself. *I must have looked so stupid!*

She raised her head, expecting to see mockery or amusement in her teacher's eyes. But the lithe black cat was watching her with an unreadable gaze.

"You did well," Nightpaw meowed gently, "but you risk unbalancing yourself when you shift your weight so often, like you were. Try another way to keep your steps light."

Rosekit huffed, determined not to make a fool of herself this time, and dropped back into the hunter's crouch. Instead of shifting with every step, she tried it every two steps, between her front and hind legs. This time she tripped over her own paws and slid to the ground again.

Scrambling to her paws, she hissed, "I'll never get this right!"

"You're being too hard on yourself, Rosekit," Nightpaw murmured soothingly. "Even Cherryfur had to learn how to stalk, the same way you are, and she's the best hunter and tracker in the whole Clan!"

Rosekit's eyes widened. She couldn't imagine Cherryfur as a clumsy apprentice, trying to figure out where and how to put her paws down. "*Cherryfur?* No way!"

"Yes way," Nightpaw purred with laughter. "One of the elders, Brokenstem, was her mentor, all those moons ago. He told me it took her ages to get it right. He said she would go out by herself way before dawn, and practice in the training hollow until she was falling asleep during training!"

Laughter burst from Rosekit too. "Poor Cherrypaw! But it looks like

all that hard work really paid off for her. The whole Clan admires her skill."

"It sure did. And if you work hard like she did, if you practice every day, you'll be as good as Cherryfur."

"You really think so?"

"I *know* so. You're very keen to learn."

Rosekit purred with pleasure at the black apprentice's praise. *I hope his apprenticeship lasts long enough for me to train with him. He'll be a great warrior, and an even better mentor!*

Aloud she replied, "Then I'll keep practicing. I'll catch you a nice, plump twig to show you how good my stalking is."

Nightpaw laughed, flicking his tail over Rosekit's ear. "Silly furball. I'm going to Grayleaf's den to see if there's anything she can do for my paw." He flicked his tail in farewell and padded away.

"Thanks for teaching me the crouch!" Rosekit called after him.

The little she-kit settled herself back into the hunting crouch and began creeping forward once more. But she found it hard to focus on her practice; the memory of Nightpaw's gentle encouragement, and the excitement of knowing that she would be apprenticed any day now, kept popping into her mind until she decided to stop for the day.

I'm going to be the hardest-working apprentice, and the best warrior in the whole Clan! she vowed to herself. *Just you wait and see, SunClan!*

Chapter 2

"Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey join beneath the Cliffrock for a Clan meeting!"

Rosekit wriggled with excitement beside Dawnkit as Adderstar's commanding yowl sounded from outside. Even in the nursery she could hear the SunClan leader's voice echo.

Today's the day! My apprentice ceremony!

"Okay, it's time! You remember what to do. Don't you?" Patchflower was fussing over Rosekit and Dawnkit, making sure their fur was flat and glossy and that the kits knew what to do during the ceremony.

"Yes, Patchflower," Dawnkit repeated to her mother. "We remember."

"What are we waiting for?" Rosekit meowed, flicking her tail decisively. "I don't know about you, but I'm not going to be late for my apprentice ceremony." She sprang to her paws and trotted out of the nursery.

"Impatient furball," Dawnkit muttered behind her, just loud enough for Rosekit to hear. The sound of pawsteps told her that her sister and Patchflower were following her.

Rosekit gazed up at Adderstar, who was perched atop the giant boulder jutting out of the ground, like a cliff, which gave the rock its name. Adderstar's powerful build was outlined in the rising sun, and his amber eyes seemed to glow. He scanned the clearing proudly as cats emerged from their dens or rose from sharing tongues, until almost the whole Clan was gathering under the Cliffrock. Grayleaf crouched at the entrance to her den, while all the queens—except Patchflower—were settled at the nursery entrance.

Rosekit took her place beside Patchflower, with Dawnkit next to her. The cream-colored she-kit sat still and calm; only her sparkling eyes betrayed her excitement. Searching the crowd, Rosekit quickly spotted Quickstorm sitting close to the base of the Cliffrock. He had his back to her, but his pride was betrayed in every hair on his pelt.

"Cats of SunClan," Adderstar began, "this is a proud day for our Clan. Two kits have reached their six-moon mark and are ready to become apprentices."

He slithered off the top of the rock, down to the base. Beestripe, the deputy, slipped back to give him more room.

Adderstar's piercing amber gaze rested on Rosekit first. "Rosekit, come forward."

She shivered, suddenly not so willing to stand in front of the entire Clan. But Adderstar beckoned her warmly with his tail, sending a much-needed surge of confidence flowing through her.

As calmly as she could, Rosekit stood and padded forward to stand in front of Adderstar. Her fur prickled with the knowledge that every cat's stare was trained on her.

"From this moment you will be known as Rosepaw," Adderstar meowed. Then he looked into the crowd, and his eyes fixed on a reddish-brown tom with pale amber eyes. "Pineclaw, you are a young but experienced warrior, and I trust you to pass on your skills to your new apprentice."

Pineclaw trotted out of the throng of cats to meet Rosepaw. His eyes sparked with pride as he leaned down to touch noses with his new apprentice. It occurred to Rosepaw that she must be his very first apprentice.

"Don't be nervous," Pineclaw murmured. "You'll be just fine with me!"

Rosepaw felt herself relax. She liked her mentor already. She thanked StarClan she didn't have some boring, solemn warrior for a mentor.

Rosepaw followed Pineclaw to the edge of the crowd. Rosepaw remembered with a pang of sadness that Dawnkit was next—but she wasn't going to be a warrior apprentice.

"Dawnkit, it's your turn," Adderstar mewed, beckoning the kit forward. Dawnkit obediently walked up to the Clan leader.

"Dawnkit has chosen a special path in the Clan," Adderstar meowed. "She is going to be a medicine cat apprentice."

Murmurs of surprise rose from the Clan, but they gradually turned to nods of agreement. Rosepaw stifled a frustrated hiss. Clearly she was the only one who *didn't* want Dawnkit to be a medicine cat.

"From this moment you will be known as Dawnpaw," Adderstar went on. "Your mentor, Grayleaf, has been our medicine cat for many moons, and I know that she will pass on her wisdom and compassion to you."

Rosepaw realized that Grayleaf had bounded up to the front of the Clan, touching noses with the newly named Dawnpaw.

"I'll do the best I can," the medicine cat promised.

"And so will I," Dawnpaw mewed. Grayleaf's eyes were warm as she looked at her apprentice.

Yet again Rosepaw felt angry. *Why can't you do your best to be a* warrior *instead?* she wailed silently.

Then she realized she was being selfish. Dawnpaw had chosen her path in Clan life without caring what she thought, and that was how it should be. *I shouldn't be jealous of my sister for choosing the path that's right for her. All that matters is that she's happy with her decision. Mouse-brain!* she scolded herself.

Suddenly Rosepaw was jolted from her thoughts. The Clan had started to chant the names of the new apprentices. "Rosepaw! Dawnpaw! Rosepaw! Dawnpaw!" She heard the friendly, welcoming tone of SunClan yowling as one, and she quivered with happiness.

Dawnpaw bounded over to her. "Isn't this amazing?" she whispered.

"Oh, I can't wait to start my training!"

"Me neither!" Rosepaw purred. "I'm going to catch the juiciest mouse in the whole forest as my first prey, and I'll bring it straight to you."

Dawnpaw *mrrowed* with laughter. "I can taste it already," she joked. Glancing back at Grayleaf, she added, "I'd better go and see what Grayleaf and I are doing. See you later?"

"See you," Rosepaw mewed, trying not to let her sadness show in her voice as her sister padded away.

I'd better go find Pineclaw. Where did he go?

Rosepaw quickly spotted her mentor, who was surrounded by the other young warriors, who were congratulating him. She sat down a few tail-lengths away and waited patiently for Pineclaw.

Just a few heartbeats later Pineclaw came up to her. "We're going to start with a tour of the territory," he explained. "I'll show you our borders with other Clans, the best places to hunt or find moss, among other things."

"Okay," Rosepaw replied. Tentatively she asked, "Will Dawnpaw and Grayleaf be coming with us?"

Pineclaw shook his head. "They'll be doing a separate tour. Grayleaf has to show Dawnpaw where to find all the different herbs on our territory."

"Oh. Okay." Rosepaw couldn't help feeling disappointed. *How often will I get to spend time with her now?* she wondered desperately. *She doesn't even sleep in the same den as me anymore!*

Pineclaw seemed to sense Rosepaw's feelings, and touched his nose to her ear comfortingly.

"It must be hard knowing your sister isn't going to be a warrior with you," he said, his eyes round with sympathy. "But StarClan has set her paws on a different path. You must accept that."

Rosepaw was faintly surprised to hear a young warrior speaking such wise words. Somehow Pineclaw comforted her more than Dawnpaw herself had the day she made her decision to be a medicine cat.

"I know," she responded. "It's just...not what I expected, I guess."

Pineclaw's gaze rested on her a moment longer. Then he mewed, "Come, now. It'll be your first time out of camp!"

He flicked his tail playfully over her ears and bolted towards the curtain of ivy that covered the camp entrance, leaving Rosepaw to race after him in an effort to catch up.

She stopped abruptly, gasping aloud. All around her was a huge expanse of forest, shades of green and brown blended together. Every bush and tree leaf hissed in the wind, and quiet scuffling in the undergrowth hinted at prey that was yet to be caught. Opening her jaws to taste the air, dozens of scents mingled together; oak sap, mouse, squirrel, thrush, a variety of different herbs...*how do warriors distinguish them all?* she thought incredulously.

"Wow!" she breathed to Pineclaw, who had stopped a couple fox-lengths ahead of her. "I never imagined the forest was so huge!"

"You're lucky to have been apprenticed in the middle of greenleaf," Pineclaw replied. "This is when the forest is lush and crawling with all sorts of prey to catch. But during leaf-fall and leaf-bare, the leaves change color and fall off the trees, and prey is much harder to find."

Rosepaw nodded. She knew this already.

"I'll show you the training hollow first," he added. "Come, this way."

The red warrior slipped through the dense undergrowth like a shadow. Rosepaw hurried to follow him, afraid she would lose his trail among the endless forest smells.

The cats walked along a path that was heavily worn by countless pawsteps. Eventually they came into a clearing several fox-lengths long and almost totally cleared of undergrowth.

"This is the hollow," Pineclaw meowed. "Plenty of space for practicing hunting and battle moves, and patches of undergrowth to practice camouflage."

"When will we have our first lesson?" Rosepaw asked eagerly.

"Tomorrow," Pineclaw answered. "Learning the territory comes first."

He spun around and went back down the path that they came through. Rosepaw padded after him.

"Where are we going next?" she asked.

"We'll head up towards the FireClan border, and I'll show you any landmarks that are along the way," Pineclaw meowed.

"FireClan?" Rosepaw wrinkled her nose. "The elders always say that they like to cause trouble."

Pineclaw's whiskers twitched. "You could say that. They're about as fierce as the thing their Clan is named after. Don't try making them angry!"

"Are they dangerous?"

"Yes. All battle-trained warriors are, after all. But as long as you keep to the warrior code—and to your side of the border—then you should be fine. Even FireClan knows better than to disobey the warrior code."

Rosepaw nodded somberly. Yet another reason she would try her hardest to stay loyal to the code. *I'm not getting my pelt torn off by a FireClan warrior!*

Eventually Pineclaw stopped beside a gigantic oak tree. Rosepaw stared up into its seemingly endless branches until her neck started to ache.

"You listen to the elders talk, don't you?" Pineclaw meowed. "Do you know what this place is?"

Rosepaw thought for a moment, then lashed her tail with realization. "Right! This is the Sun Oak, isn't it?"

Pineclaw nodded approvingly. "It's a great spot to hunt birds and squirrels."

"The elders told stories of SunClan's first leader climbing to the very top of the tree, so he could scout out our territory. It was one of my favorites." Suddenly purring, she added, "Old Ashwhisker says she climbed to the top too, when she was an apprentice. I don't believe a word she says!"

Pineclaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "I would need StarClan themselves to tell me if that's true," he joked. "Now, we're getting close to the border with FireClan, so don't speak. I want to get this over with quickly and quietly; those cats can be pricklier than hedgehogs even if we're on our side of the border."

Rosepaw nodded, lightening her steps. She tasted the air and found that a new scent had appeared: cat scent, but much more acrid than the soft, familiar scent of SunClan.

Am I just more used to my own Clan's scent, she asked herself, *or do the other Clans really smell this terrible?* She wrinkled her nose.

In front of her, Pineclaw raised his tail in a signal to halt. She stopped and peered over his shoulder.

The stench of FireClan flooded her nostrils, blocking out any other scents around her. The border was a thin stream, lined with bushes and flowers. Beyond it, the forest was much thinner, with sparser undergrowth and trees. The canopy of leaves in SunClan territory blotted out the sun and made the forest dim; here, shafts of sunlight stabbed through the thin canopy and made dancing patterns on the forest floor.

"This is FireClan territory," Pineclaw meowed, "but of course you knew that already. Soon you'll go on your first border patrol and learn how to set your own scent markers, so FireClan clearly knows they can't set paw past this stream. For now we can move on to the MoonClan boundary."

"Shouldn't you set a marker now?" Rosepaw asked, rubbing her nose irritably with her paw. "Their stink is so strong I can't smell anything else!"

"That's actually normal. If you ask me, FireClan sets their markers *way* more often than they need to, those paranoid furballs."

Rosepaw snorted. *Not that we would even try to steal their territory,* she thought. *I would hate not having a thick canopy over my head. I would feel so exposed!*

"Now, commit the scent to memory so you don't forget what they smell like," Pineclaw instructed.

"Oh, I'm not going to forget anytime soon," Rosepaw scoffed. "As much as I want to!"

Pineclaw purred with amusement and beckoned his apprentice with a sweep of his tail. "Then come on. Let's head for the MoonClan border."

Rosepaw followed cheerily, glad to leave the FireClan boundary behind and excited to see more of the territory. It took nearly all her self-control not to leap into the air with glee.

She was finally an apprentice! She was going to learn every tail-length of SunClan's territory; she was going to make lots of new friends with the other apprentices, especially Nightpaw; she would learn how to catch prey for her Clan and how to defend it with her life, just as any true warrior did.

It doesn't get any better than that!

Chapter 3

Rosepaw flopped down just beside the entrance to the apprentice den, feeling like her paws had been worn away. She and Pineclaw had toured almost the whole territory, and by the time they had gotten back the sun was going down. She was exhausted, but she couldn't have been happier.

She bent down and began licking her chest lazily. She would groom herself, she decided, then go pick something from the well-stocked fresh-kill pile in the center of the camp. Pineclaw had given her permission to eat.

Suddenly a shadow fell over Rosepaw, and she glanced up to see Nightpaw looking at her with a friendly gleam in his eyes.

"Hi," he mewed, settling beside her. "How was the tour?"

"Exhausting! But fun nonetheless," Rosepaw replied. "We went to the FireClan and MoonClan borders. MoonClan didn't smell so bad, but *FireClan*...great StarClan, they reek!"

Nightpaw purred. "You can say that again!" He glanced toward the camp entrance and added, "Shadowpaw and Minnowpaw should be here any time now. They were sent hunting during training today."

"What did you do for training today?" Rosepaw prompted, resuming her grooming.

"Battle training," Nightpaw answered proudly. "Thrushtail was really impressed! And he's a senior warrior, so his praise means a lot."

"That's great!" Rosepaw replied. "Pineclaw may not be a senior warrior, but he's definitely easy to get along with. I like him already."

Nightpaw tilted his head. "Is that so?" he meowed.

Rosepaw blinked at her friend in confusion, but before she could respond another friendly mew reached her ears.

"Hey, Nightpaw. And if it isn't the newest apprentice, Rosepaw!"

A silver tabby she-cat was padding towards them, with a darker gray tom trailing behind. Rosepaw recognized them as the older apprentices, Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw respectively. Shadowpaw carried a fat mouse in his jaws; it was so big that he seemed to be tripping over it as he walked.

"Is that for us?" Nightpaw asked, flicking his tail towards the fresh-kill.

"Sure is," Minnowpaw replied. Puffing her chest out, she added proudly, "I caught it myself, so you're welcome!"

Nightpaw rolled his eyes and muttered good-humoredly to Rosepaw, "Minnowpaw. The most self-possessed furball I've ever met!"

Rosepaw stifled a *mrrow* of laughter in case the silver she-cat overheard. She wasn't about to make enemies with an older apprentice on her first day!

Finishing her grooming, she sat up as Shadowpaw set the mouse down in the center of the circle of apprentices. He settled beside his sister, and the group began to eat.

After a while, Rosepaw prompted, "So what did you two do for the day?" She didn't like the silence, and her pelt was itching to know what she should expect for her training.

Shadowpaw's eyes lit up. "We did this awesome partner hunting exercise! Minnowpaw was on the ground under an oak tree, and I climbed onto a low branch. Then she chased squirrels up the tree, right into my paws!" He bit viciously into the mouse, as if he was imagining one of the squirrels in his jaws.

"That sounds amazing!" Nightpaw gasped. "How many did you catch?"

"Four? Or maybe three," Minnowpaw replied. "The elders gobbled them up so quickly I'm not even sure anymore!"

The young cats shared a laugh. Rosepaw backed away from the mouse, settling her chin on her paws contentedly. *I could get used to this!*

Gazing lazily around the camp, she suddenly spotted Dawnpaw trotting towards her, tail up and curled happily. Rosepaw scrambled up, mewing a quick "be right back" to the other apprentices, and raced to meet her sister.

"Dawnpaw! How was your first day with Grayleaf?"

"It was fantastic!" Dawnpaw answered. "I feel like I know so much already, but there's still so much to learn! And Grayleaf is such a good mentor."

"You toured the territory with her, right?"

"Yep. She showed me all the best places to find sorrel, and marigold, and dock, and—"

Dawnpaw abruptly went silent, shaking her head with amusement. "Look at me, yapping my head off like a loose dog. What about you? How was Pineclaw? What did you see on your tour?"

Rosepaw blinked happily. "Pineclaw is a great mentor. He showed me nearly the whole territory, and he answered every question I had. He even taught me a few things early, when we stopped at landmarks. I'm glad Adderstar chose him for me."

Dawnpaw *mrrowed* with laughter. "It's the first day. Don't go mooning over him just yet!"

Rosepaw cuffed her sister over her ear with one paw. "I am *not* mooning over him!" she huffed indignantly. "Stupid furball. You sound like Nightpaw."

"So Nightpaw noticed too? It must be too obvious, then."

Rosepaw opened her mouth to respond, but decided to say nothing.

She shook her head fondly. "You can think whatever you want. That doesn't mean it's true!"

Dawnpaw laughed again, her whiskers twitching. "If you say so. Now, I need to bring some prey to the medicine den or Grayleaf will have my tail. See you later!"

"Bye!" Rosepaw called as Dawnpaw raced away. She shook herself, then trotted back to her friends. The mouse was gone, with pieces of chipped bone scattered here and there, and Minnowpaw was meowing something excitedly.

"The Gathering is a few days from now! Do you think I'll be allowed to go?"

"Probably," Nightpaw replied. "The older apprentices usually go to every Gathering, right?"

"Although...Thumpstep wasn't exactly *impressed* with your tree hunting skills yesterday," Shadowpaw chimed in. Thumpstep was a senior warrior, Minnowpaw's mentor, and one of the biggest cats in all of SunClan. He had gained a reputation for having sheer strength in battle—but he wasn't the best at stalking through undergrowth undetected, like most SunClan cats.

"Bah." Minnowpaw flicked her tail with contempt. "Like he could've done any better! I tell you, he's a grumpy elder in a warrior's body."

"Don't let Thumpstep hear you say that," Nightpaw warned. But his eyes were glimmering with laughter nonetheless.

"Will I get to come to the Gathering?" Rosepaw asked, settling back down beside Nightpaw.

"Definitely," Shadowpaw mewed. "Unless you misbehave, the new apprentices always come to the Gathering—well, their first one, at least. Don't expect to *always* be picked to come along."

"What are Gatherings like?"

"Oh, they're *great*," Minnowpaw purred. "Tons of cats from every Clan show up, and believe me when I say you've never seen so

many cats in one place. The apprentices discuss their training; warriors talk about being mentors and swap battle stories. Elders sit in a corner and talk about 'the old days,' and how mouse-brained young cats are, and such. And the leaders share Clan news with all the cats there."

Rosepaw nodded slowly as the silvery she-cat rambled. *Sounds almost exactly like the Gatherings the queens used to talk about, when I was still in the nursery.*

"Sometimes the leaders start arguing, and then lots of cats start hissing and spitting at each other," Minnowpaw went on. "It gets so tense, and it's awesome!"

Shadowpaw glanced uncertainly at his sister. "The leaders aren't even supposed to fight or argue at Gatherings," he pointed out. "It's against the warrior code. There's nothing awesome about that."

"Whatever. It's still funny to watch," Minnowpaw muttered.

Rosepaw pricked her ears with interest. "What happens when the leaders fight, if it's against the code?"

"StarClan sends clouds to cover the full moon, sending the whole clearing into darkness. The Gathering ends, too." Shadowpaw seemed uneasy just talking about it; his ears twitched rapidly.

"Shadowpaw was there the last time that happened," Minnowpaw meowed. She added irritably, "Lucky. I wish I had been there to see it!"

"No, you don't," Shadowpaw responded, rolling his eyes. "It was terrifying. Honestly, Minnowpaw, sometimes I don't think you even know what 'fear' means!"

"Real warriors shouldn't!" she argued. "Real warriors refuse to feel fear, so they can do anything to defend their Clanmates."

"Hmm. Not quite, Minnowpaw."

All four apprentices spun around to see Cherryfur, Shadowpaw's mentor, watching them, her ears pricked as if she had been

listening to them for a while.

"Real warriors should always feel fear, because being fearful means you truly know what you're up against," the ginger warrior continued. "And that's where courage comes from, because you are still willing to face the danger even though you're scared. It is the beast, not the warrior, that has no fear in his heart."

Rosepaw felt sobered by Cherryfur's wise words, and knew that she would remember them for a long time, perhaps the rest of her life.

She glanced curiously at Minnowpaw. The fiery apprentice was now hunched up with her head low and tail flicking steadily.

Hmph. For once Minnowpaw has been put in her place!

But as Cherryfur nodded to the apprentices and stalked away, Rosepaw heard Minnowpaw hiss softly, "Wrong. Real warriors should *never* feel fear."

It had been so hushed that, for a moment, she wasn't sure she had even heard it. But in her head she knew exactly what she had heard, and she stifled a nervous shiver.

I don't like how easily she dismisses the words of warriors, especially senior warriors. Maybe I would *rather not be friends with her.*

Trying to put it out of her mind, she rose and stretched luxuriously. "I'm going to sleep now. My training starts at sunhigh tomorrow."

"I'll go with you," Nightpaw yawned. "That warm mouse made me sleepy!"

Together they slipped into the den, leaving Shadowpaw and Minnowpaw outside.

"Look for the nest lined with feathers," Nightpaw mewed. "That's yours. I wanted your first night to be nice and comfortable."

"Thanks," Rosepaw responded, surprised by her friend's kind gesture. She flopped down in her nest, shifting until she felt comfortable. It wasn't as cozy as her warm nest in the nursery, but

she didn't need any of that anymore. She was a warrior apprentice now.

With a familiar pang of loneliness, Rosepaw wondered if Dawnpaw was feeling the same way about her nest. *I would know,* she thought, *if she slept in the same den as me.*

But her sister's paws tugged her to a different destiny than her own, and she had to accept that, even if she didn't like it. If it was StarClan's will for Dawnpaw to be a medicine cat, then who was she to argue?

* * *

Rosepaw padded along the trail to the training hollow, following behind Pineclaw. It was the following morning, and she had slept right up until sunhigh. She stifled a yawn, resisting the urge to stop and stretch for a moment. *Once the training session begins, I'll feel much more awake.*

Rosepaw stepped into the empty training hollow, relishing the warmth of a small shaft of sunlight on her back. She sat down, watching her mentor as he trotted to sit across from her.

"Solo training sessions don't usually happen, but you're the only new warrior apprentice," Pineclaw began. "And the other apprentices are taking the day off. It'll be just us today."

Rosepaw nodded, ignoring the strange prickling in her fur.

"We're starting with a quick hunting lesson, and then I'll let you have a go at catching some real prey. Ready?"

Rosepaw nodded again, eager to begin.

Pineclaw's whiskers twitched. "You know you can speak, right?"

"Yes, I know," Rosepaw purred. "I'm ready to start!"

"All right. I trust you're familiar with the hunting crouch by now? I've seen you sneak up on your sister as a kit often."

"Er...sort of." Rosepaw tried not to dwell too long on the memory of her embarrassing training session with Nightpaw.

"It's okay if you don't know it perfectly. Kits technically aren't supposed to know it already, but who are we to stop them from practicing?" Pineclaw flicked his tail in a gesture for Rosepaw to come closer. "Now I'll show you the basic crouch."

Rosepaw watched him lower himself until his belly fur was brushing the dusty earth. He lowered his tail until it was straightly leveled with his back.

"Keep yourself as low to the ground as possible," he mewed. That way the prey won't be able to see you through the forest's undergrowth."

He glanced at her for a moment. "You'll be a fine hunter. Your patched pelt is the best kind of camouflage around here."

Rosepaw brightened, imagining herself as one of the best hunters in the Clan. *Maybe even better than Cherryfur!*

"Now, try it for yourself," Pineclaw instructed, rising to his full height again.

Rosepaw slowly lowered herself down, trying not to lean and lose her balance. Remembering what Nightpaw had taught her, she straightened her tail and held it perfectly still.
"Very good," Pineclaw praised her. "Let me see how you stalk. Creep towards, hmm...how about that strip of bark over there?"

Rosepaw narrowed her eyes to concentrate. Nightpaw had told her not to focus too much on shifting her weight—just try to keep her pawsteps light.

The bark was only a few tail-lengths away, and she successfully crept all the way to it without making a sound or losing her balance. When she was no more than a mouse-length away, she wriggled back, gathering her weight into her haunches. Then, when the momentum was built, she sprang, landing square on the bark and sinking her claws into it.

Yes!

"Well done, Rosepaw!" Pineclaw purred. "That was excellent. Now, come with me. Let's see how you do with a *real* mouse!"

Rosepaw puffed out her chest proudly, relieved she hadn't messed anything up. Pineclaw's praise warmed her from ears to tail-tip.

She scrambled to catch up to her mentor, who had already darted away into the dense undergrowth. *I'll catch the plumpest mouse in the entire forest, and I'll impress the whole Clan!*

It was only her first day of training, but Rosepaw felt that her apprenticeship couldn't be going any better.

Chapter 4

When they had left for training at sunhigh, Pineclaw had led the way out of camp. Now, Rosepaw was leading the way back in, dragging along a huge mouse and holding a pigeon beneath her chin.

She caught sight of her sister racing over to her. "Oh, wow!" Dawnpaw exclaimed. "Rosepaw, that's an amazing catch!"

Flicking her tail delightedly, Rosepaw managed a nod of acknowledgement. *Great StarClan, this mouse is heavy! And the pigeon doesn't help much, either!*

"She's right." Rosepaw recognized the voice of Patchflower, her mother. "You did splendidly on your first day. Be sure to tell your father all about it when he gets back from his patrol; he'll be so proud of you!"

"Come on," Pineclaw meowed, "let's unload your catch at the prey pile. You look like you're about to fall over!"

I just might, Rosepaw replied silently as she stumbled after her mentor.

"This mouse will certainly go to the elders," Pineclaw mewed. "It looks like enough to feed all three of them. The pigeon is yours if you want it. You'll learn soon enough that prey just tastes better when it's your kill!"

Rosepaw purred. "I think I'll have it, then," she responded. "Thanks, Pineclaw!"

Her mentor nodded and padded away. But was that *admiration* she had seen in his eyes? *Surely he couldn't be* that *impressed. Any apprentice could've caught what I did.*

Shaking her head, Rosepaw snatched up the pigeon and glanced

around, looking for Dawnpaw. She wanted to share her first catch with her littermate.

She felt a stab of disappointment when Dawnpaw was nowhere to be seen. *She was out here just a few moments ago. Is she really that busy with Grayleaf?* She recalled her promise to her sister that she would bring her first catch straight to her, saddened that she wouldn't get to fulfill it.

Then she reminded herself that Dawnpaw had dozens of different herbs to learn, as part of being a medicine cat. There probably weren't many breaks during the day, when she had so much to learn. *Still, I wish she was here to eat with me, at least.*

"Rosepaw, you okay?"

Rosepaw spun around to see Nightpaw, who was gazing at her with concern in his eyes. "Are you okay?" he repeated. "You look a bit lost."

She shook her head, dropping the pigeon. "I'm fine," she replied. "I just hoped that Dawnpaw would stay long enough to eat with me."

Nightpaw blinked sympathetically. "You wanted to share your first catch with your sister."

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry. I may not have any littermates, but I know how important that would've been to you."

"Yeah. It's okay, though." Glancing at the pigeon, she added, "Do you want to share with me instead?"

Nightpaw's eyes brightened. "Sure!"

The two apprentices crouched on either side of the pigeon and began to pluck away its feathers with their teeth.

Nightpaw spat out a feather. "I'll take these to the nursery later," he mewed. "They'll make good lining for the queens' nests."

"Good idea," Rosepaw mumbled around her own mouthful of feathers. "Rainfoot's kits are due soon, aren't they?" As a kit, Patchflower had told her not to bother Rainfoot because she was expecting kits. Rosepaw hadn't spoken much to the dappled gray queen as a result, but she knew she was going to be a good, gentle mother to her unborn kits.

Nightpaw nodded. "I'm so excited to see them when they're born!" he purred. "New kits always bring joy to the Clan."

Suddenly curious, Rosepaw asked, "What was it like when my sister and I were born? You were an apprentice by then, right?"

"No, I was still a kit, but I was going to be apprenticed soon. My mother says that it was an amusing time for the Clan when you and Dawnpaw were born. Quickstorm is a calm senior warrior, respected by the whole Clan—but when his kits were born, he could hardly sit still!"

Rosepaw laughed. She imagined her calm, collected father bouncing around the camp like he had lost ten moons of age.

Suddenly Nightpaw asked, "What was it like for you, learning that Dawnpaw was going to be a medicine cat?"

Rosepaw found herself at a loss for words, not only because of the abrupt change of subject, but because she wasn't even sure *how* she felt about it.

"I already knew she was going to be a medicine cat," she began, pawing at a pigeon feather self-consciously. "She told me a couple days before we were apprenticed. I don't really know how I feel about her decision...it was just so *unexpected.* I had always imagined us being warriors together.

"I know it was something she had to decide on her own. And I'm glad she didn't feel like she needed my approval, because she doesn't. I shouldn't stop her from following the path she chooses to follow. But...it still doesn't stop me from resenting her for her choice. We were going to be such great warriors, *together*...and now we'll never have that. Things will never be the same for us."

Finally stopping for breath, Rosepaw looked at Nightpaw again, surprised that he had listened to her rambling without interrupting. Her friend was gazing at her thoughtfully, as if carefully planning his response.

"You might not get to spend every moment together, like you did as kits," he murmured at last, "but Dawnpaw is still your sister. The bond of kinship is stronger than anything. Stronger than Clan bonds, even. As long as she's your sister, nothing will ever break the bond that you have."

Rosepaw considered his words. Dawnpaw had told her almost the exact same thing. *We may not get to train together, but I'll always be your sister.*

Nightpaw sighed, staring wistfully into the distance. "Sometimes I envy the cats with brothers and sisters," he admitted. "I was alone growing up. My litter was born just before newleaf, when sickness was just fading away. We all caught the last bit of greencough, and I was the only one who made it. I never really knew my siblings."

"I'm sorry about that." Rosepaw stretched to give him a comforting lick over his ear. "You must really miss them."

"I try to train knowing that I'll be a warrior for all three of us. I'll live in honor of the life they'll never get to see."

Rosepaw blinked fondly at her friend. Nightpaw was so young, but so mature for his age. *Now I can understand why. He's been through quite a lot already.*

Suddenly a loud rustling caught her attention. Nightpaw's ears pricked as if he had heard it too; returning patrols never usually made that much noise.

Something's wrong.

She watched as Quickstorm burst out of the fern tunnel, with Forestfire and Hazelfrost at his heels. The patrol was unhurt, but all three cats' eyes were round with worry.

"Adderstar!" Quickstorm called, his urgent meow echoing through

the silent clearing. "You need to hear this."

Below the Cliffrock, the SunClan leader emerged from the cave he used as his den. "What's going on?" he growled, padding up to the patrol.

Quickstorm sidestepped and flicked his tail towards Forestfire, who stepped forward. Rosepaw leaned forward to hear what she had to say.

"I caught a scent of rogue cats near Twolegplace," Forestfire said. "It was very strong. They've been on our territory before!"

A shocked gasp rippled through the cats that had gathered around to listen. Rosepaw exchanged a horrified glance with Nightpaw.

"Rogues?" Adderstar repeated. "You're sure these cats aren't just curious kittypets?"

Forestfire shook her head grimly. "This smelled nothing like a kittypet. A few different cat scents, plus crowfood, and the stench of the Twolegplace."

"Clearly they've gotten away with this for too long!" Hazelfrost hissed, sinking her claws into the earth. "We must chase them out. They are a threat to SunClan until we do!"

Rosepaw heard several yowls of agreement. She realized one of the loudest voices was that of Minnowpaw.

"Just a moment," Adderstar meowed. "You think we should attack these rogues head-on, with no knowledge of their strength, skill, numbers, or territory?" He twitched his whiskers. "Yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea."

Hazelfrost blinked, opening her jaws to respond, then thrust her head down, clearly thinking better of it.

"Yes, you're right that we should chase these intruders out of our territory," Adderstar went on. "But we should take this chance to study our enemy first. They don't seem to know that we're onto them now, so they'll continue to come back. We'll watch them from

afar so we can learn why they're here, what they're doing, and how we should fight them."

"Sounds reasonable," Quickstorm agreed. He glanced at Hazelfrost, who eventually nodded as well.

Adderstar turned his gaze to Forestfire again. "I'll need you to lead a new patrol back to where you found the scent," he ordered. "See if you can catch any rogues still skulking about."

Forestfire nodded and slipped into the throng of cats to choose her patrol.

Adderstar's eyes raked over his Clan. "You're all dismissed!"

As the Clan dispelled back to normal, Rosepaw let out the breath she'd been holding. She looked at Nightpaw. "Great StarClan! What are those crowfood-eating rogues doing on our territory?"

"Stealing prey!" Nightpaw exclaimed. "It may be greenleaf, but that doesn't mean SunClan is going to just give our prey away!"

"I wonder if we'll get to sink our claws into some of them. I would teach them a lesson they wouldn't soon forget!"

"Perhaps I would be allowed to fight, but I don't know about you. I'm not sure Adderstar would want a new apprentice in a battle with rogues."

"Makes sense." Rosepaw scuffed the ground disappointedly. "But maybe Pineclaw will speed up my training so I can fight." Not only did Rosepaw want to help teach these rogue cats a lesson about stealing from SunClan, but she also wanted a chance to prove herself—a chance to show the Clan what a spectacular warrior she would be!

"Maybe," Nightpaw agreed. "Now, let's eat this pigeon before it gets cold. We got a bit distracted!"

Rosepaw purred and shared the bird with her friend.

* * *

"I find it hard to believe the queens and elders *still* need more moss."

Rosepaw slithered around a tree trunk, scraping bits of moss out of her fur. Earlier, Hazelfrost had spotted her and Nightpaw lounging outside the apprentice den after finishing their pigeon. She had briskly scolded them for lazing about when there was work to be done, and sent them out into the forest to collect moss for fresh nests. And, after two trips back to camp with more than enough moss, the prickly she-cat had sent them out yet again. It was getting dark.

"They probably don't," Nightpaw grunted, peering at the roots of the tree to look for moss. "If you ask me, Hazelfrost is just mad Adderstar dismissed her idea so easily."

He had good reason to do so, Rosepaw thought. *Clearly Hazelfrost doesn't think that strategy is needed before battle!*

"Well, at least now we'll be the apprentices who brought back enough moss for a lifetime of new nests!" she joked.

Nightpaw purred. "Speaking of which, I found a pretty big clump here. Help me pull it up."

Shaking herself to rid her pelt of any more scraps of moss, Rosepaw bounded over and sunk her claws carefully into the moss. Together the apprentices gently tugged it out of the ground. Nightpaw dragged it over to the small pile of moss they had already amassed and left it there.

Rosepaw was about to turn back to the tree to look for more when she picked up a small rustling sound. She pricked her ears, straining to pinpoint the sound. She heard it again, and confirmed that it was coming from a nearby bush.

Maybe a mouse searching for food. Little does it know that it just became SunClan's food!

She glanced back at Nightpaw and raised her tail, hoping he would get the signal to be quiet. Creeping towards the bush, she opened her jaws, and the scent of mouse flooded her mouth, confirming her

assumption. Narrowing her eyes, she could just make out what looked like a lump of dusty brown fur snuffling about.

It has no idea I'm here. Perfect.

Rosepaw crept a few pawsteps closer, watching her step, and being careful to keep her tail absolutely still.

But suddenly the mouse squeaked and scurried out from the bush. Rosepaw could swear on StarClan that neither she nor Nightpaw had made a sound. *Oh no! I must have waited too long, and it found what it was looking for.*

For a moment she realized that her prey had still not seen her tortoiseshell pelt. That was until the mouse froze, squeaked even louder, and scurried away much faster than before, toward a large bramble bush.

No! I'm going to lose it! Desperately Rosepaw gave chase, and without a second thought leaped into the bramble bush right after the mouse. Her paw shot out blindly in front of her, claws extended, and with some luck she felt her claws meet in the mouse's pelt, pinning it to the ground.

Quickly, with what little room she had to move in, Rosepaw leaned forward and dispatched her prey with a sharp bite to the neck. *That was close!*

Now that she had caught the mouse, she realized her new predicament. She was stuck in the bramble bush, and even the slightest movement caused the thorns to dig even deeper into her fur. She hissed painfully.

She heard Nightpaw's meow behind her. "Are you stuck?"

"What does it look like to you, bee-brain?" Rosepaw retorted, rolling her eyes.

Nightpaw purred with amusement. "Sorry. Let me see what I can do. Maybe if I pull a few tendrils out here...hmm..."

Rosepaw waited silently while her friend paced around the

brambles, tugging the thorns this way and that, until eventually she felt she had enough room to wriggle free.

As she slid out, she felt the brambles' final effort to tear through her pelt, and hissed again.

"Thanks, Nightpaw," she panted.

"No problem," he responded, his eyes round with worry. "I can see a lot of cuts through your fur. You should go see Grayleaf."

"What about the moss?"

"I'll get it. You take the mouse back to camp."

"Okay."

Wincing, Rosepaw snatched up the mouse and limped back towards the camp, feeling triumphant of her catch in spite of the painful ordeal that had followed.

Chapter 5

Dawnpaw nudged the newly sorted herbs into their respective hollows in the ground of the medicine den. She let out a satisfied breath; all the freshly picked herbs sorted before sundown, just as Grayleaf had briskly asked her to. *She'll be pleased at how quickly I can do this!*

She glanced around, suddenly wondering what to do now. Grayleaf had not given her any other tasks, and was now gone from the camp again, to see what else she could find before sundown.

"As if we really need more herbs," she muttered to herself, glancing at the overflowing herb holes. But it was better to have to many herbs than not enough, right?

I suppose I should go see the elders, and find out if they need anything.

Stretching luxuriously, Dawnpaw padded out of the den, relishing the feeling of the setting sun's warmth on her back. Inside the den was cool and dim, with a canopy of ferns as a rain-proof roof.

Dawnpaw was halfway to the elders' den, when she heard someone call her name.

She turned toward the sound, ears pricked curiously, and saw Grayleaf approaching with a tiny bundle of herbs in her jaws and a smaller cat leaned on her shoulder. Suddenly Dawnpaw recognized the scratched, ruffled tortoiseshell fur. *Rosepaw!*

Her heart lurched. Was her sister okay? What happened? Did Grayleaf need help? She rushed toward Rosepaw and Grayleaf.

She slid to a halt in front of her sister and immediately began sniffing her scratches. "Great StarClan, Rosepaw! What happened to you? Did you get into a fight?"

To her surprise, Grayleaf's eyes glimmered with amusement. "She

did indeed," the medicine cat replied. "She fought a bramble bush and lost!"

Rosepaw rolled her eyes good-humoredly. "I was after a mouse and didn't see where I was going," she explained. "Nightpaw helped free me, and then sent me back to camp."

"I found her stumbling her way back to the camp and helped her the rest of the way after she told me what happened," Grayleaf added.

Oh, thank StarClan, Dawnpaw thought with relief. *She isn't seriously hurt.*

Aloud she mewed, "Nightpaw? He was gathering moss with you, right?"

Rosepaw nodded. "If you're wondering, he's on his way back now with the moss."

"All right. We should get you to the medicine den and treat all those cuts."

"Yes, come on," Grayleaf agreed. "The cuts may not be big, but together they can be quite nasty."

Dawnpaw bounded ahead to make sure a nest was prepared for Rosepaw. She used her tail to sweep dirt off of one mossy nest. She sat down beside it as Grayleaf led Rosepaw into the den.

As Rosepaw settled into the nest with a wince, Grayleaf prompted, "Right. Dawnpaw, what would we use to treat Rosepaw's scratches?"

"Hmm...marigold, to stop the bleeding and prevent infection," she responded after a moment of thought.

"Yes, we could, but there's another herb that's even better for smaller cuts. We usually use marigold for larger wounds, and these cuts are whisker-thin."

Dawnpaw thought hard, trying to remember as quickly as she could. "That's right, dock leaves!" she blurted suddenly. "Perfect for

smaller wounds, right?"

"Yes, very good," Grayleaf praised her. "I'll go get some now."

As she padded away, Rosepaw meowed, "You know so much already!" Her round eyes stared at Dawnpaw with awe.

"I only listed two herbs and what they do," Dawnpaw murmured, beginning to feel embarrassed. "That's not even half of it all."

Grayleaf quickly returned with two dock leaves held loosely in her mouth. She set them down in front of Dawnpaw.

"Chew these up and squeeze the juice into the wounds," she instructed. "And by the way, you did well sorting the herbs. I'll stow away the ones I just gathered while you're busy."

Dawnpaw tingled with happy pride. She had learned quickly that her mentor was a brisk teacher; to earn praise from her was a thing to be proud of!

She gathered the leaves in her mouth and chewed slowly, drawing out the healing juices in the leaves. She wrinkled her nose at the bitter taste.

Around the mouthful she mumbled, "This will sting a bit, but the pain should be short-lived." Rosepaw nodded and shifted to give Dawnpaw easy access to her scratches.

Dawnpaw spat out the dock pulp onto her patient's fur and began licking the juice into the cuts. Occasionally Rosepaw would hiss in pain or sink her claws into the moss, but she stayed still until the job was done.

"All right, you're all done," Dawnpaw mewed with satisfaction. "There's no bleeding anymore, so you won't need cobwebs. You're free to go."

Rosepaw stood and examined her flank, her green eyes glowing. "Wow! I don't know what those leaves did, but it barely hurts anymore. Thanks!"

Dawnpaw purred with pleasure. "It's my job!"

Her sister was turning to leave, when suddenly she stopped and turned back around. "Do you want to share prey with me?" she asked. "That is, if you don't have anything else Grayleaf wants you to do."

Dawnpaw glanced back into the shady depths of the den, where Grayleaf was sorting the herbs she had collected. *There's no other work to be done. Grayleaf won't mind.*

She looked at Rosepaw again. "Sure," she replied happily. "I still haven't eaten with you as an apprentice!"

Rosepaw weaved around her sister, purring, and Dawnpaw followed her out of the medicine den, toward the fresh-kill pile.

Rosepaw dragged a mouse out of the pile and towards the apprentice den. Dawnpaw followed behind, and the sisters settled outside the den to eat.

"How has your training been so far?" Rosepaw prompted around her mouthful of prey. "Anything interesting you've learned or had to do?"

Dawnpaw shook her head. "There's always the occasional stiff joints from the elders or a cracked paw pad, and that's all I've really dealt with—besides your injuries, of course. I hope I'll be experienced enough to be helpful when leaf-bare comes back around, and disease sets in."

"You'll be fine," Rosepaw mewed cheerfully. "Leaf-fall might be near, but leaf-bare is still a long way off. Grayleaf will have prepared you well by then."

Dawnpaw nodded, feeling reassured. *I just don't want to watch my Clan fall ill and be powerless to help them.*

"What about you?" she meowed aloud. "How have things been with the other apprentices?"

"Oh, it's been great," Rosepaw responded. "Nightpaw has been a

good friend, and Shadowpaw is always eager to talk about training. And Minnowpaw...well..."

The tortoiseshell trailed off, and Dawnpaw wondered why the pretty apprentice troubled her sister.

At last Rosepaw uttered, "Minnowpaw is a great hunter and fighter, but...I don't like how arrogant she is. Cherryfur's a senior warrior, and Minnowpaw disrespected her word behind her back with no hesitation."

Dawnpaw blinked. "Is that really a reason to be suspicious of her, though?" She understood full well that disrespecting a senior warrior was not something to make a habit of. But it sounded as if Rosepaw saw the action as more than just mere arrogance.

Rosepaw huffed. "I know it's not much to go off of, but...I don't know. It just unnerves me." She shook her head as if to clear her mind of her worries.

Dawnpaw didn't like seeing her usually cheery sister so worried. She touched the tip of her tail to her sister's flank. "I'll watch out for anything else strange, if it makes you feel better," she offered.

Rosepaw nodded gratefully, then suddenly glanced behind her.

Dawnpaw twisted around to see Pineclaw standing behind her. With a twinge of alarm she wondered if the red warrior had overheard their conversation.

But Pineclaw's pale eyes gave nothing of the sort away. "I have some news, Rosepaw," he mewed. "You'll be going to the Gathering in a couple days."

Dawnpaw glanced back at her sister. Rosepaw's round eyes were now wide with excitement, and her tail flicked back and forth rhythmically.

"Thank you!" she purred. "But wait, which other apprentices are going? Is Dawnpaw coming too?"

"Medicine cats and their apprentices always attend Gatherings

unless something important is holding them back," Pineclaw replied. "So Dawnpaw will be going. Nightpaw's also going."

"Yes!" Rosepaw sprang to her paws and bounced around Dawnpaw, who felt her own fur bristle with excitement. "Our first Gathering, and we get to go together, Dawnpaw! Nightpaw, too!"

Pineclaw's eyes were fixed on his apprentice, and they glimmered with laughter. "Your first Gathering is always the most exciting."

Dawnpaw suddenly realized this meant she would be meeting the medicine cats from the other three Clans. *I wonder if any of them have apprentices too. It would be nice to not be the only apprentice medicine cat.*

Pineclaw's deep meow interrupted her musing. "Well, I'll leave you to finish your mouse now." As he turned away, he glanced back at Rosepaw, his eyes approving. "By the way, Nightpaw just returned with the last load of moss you collected. You did fantastically, and we won't need to gather moss at all for a while." Blinking at his apprentice, he finally turned and padded away.

"Well, that should make you and Nightpaw popular with the other apprentices," Dawnpaw joked to her sister. "You've saved them from doing a chore!"

Rosepaw snorted. "They'd take collecting moss over searching the elders for ticks any day. But I suppose you're right!" She bent her head to take another bite of the mouse. Her eyes clouded and one ear twitched, and Dawnpaw realized she was already lost in her own thoughts.

Wondering briefly what her sister was thinking about, Dawnpaw followed suit and dug into the prey.

* * *

Dawnpaw craned her neck, curious to see the Gathering place known as the Moontree. But she was still quite small, and her fellow Clanmates who were chosen for the Gathering—Adderstar, Beestripe, Grayleaf, Cherryfur, Hazelfrost, Ebonypelt, Thumpstep,

Nightpaw, Rosepaw, and the elders—thronged around her and limited her vision.

Oh well, she thought. *I'll get a good look at the place when we get there.*

At the front of the patrol, Adderstar was conversing with his deputy. "How much should I say about the rogues from Twolegplace?" the SunClan leader asked.

"As of right now they aren't a big threat to our Clan," Beestripe responded. "I think a simple warning to the other Clans to look out for the rogues would be enough."

"That seems reasonable. We'll be preparing the Clans for trouble without seeming vulnerable."

Beestripe nodded without replying, and the patrol carried on in silence.

After a while the patrol suddenly halted, and Dawnpaw's heart skipped a beat. She could hear murmuring up ahead, and when she tasted the air, so many scents flooded over her tongue that she couldn't even distinguish which Clan was which. They had reached the Moontree!

Rosepaw slid up to her side. "Isn't this exciting?" she whispered with shining eyes and a quivering tail. "I can't *wait* to meet all the other apprentices!"

"You can talk to them, but you must be careful not to make SunClan seem weak or vulnerable," Hazelfrost warned, her icy eyes seeming to slice through Rosepaw. "Even an apprentice would instantly report any weaknesses that are exposed."

Rosepaw's eyes narrowed, and she nodded soberly.

Dawnpaw wondered to herself whether Gatherings were truly peaceful, if cats had to be so careful with what they said. *I'm glad I'm a medicine cat. At least we don't have normal Clan boundaries to separate us from one another.*

Dawnpaw's gaze flicked forward as Adderstar raised his tail to give

the signal to move. The tip of his tail flicked, and her breath hitched in her throat as the entire patrol descended through the bushes and down the slope like a mudslide.

All of a sudden her pelt burned with the stares of more cats than she had ever seen in her life. Some were crouched in ragged circles; some were lying in the shade of bushes; and some were sitting in the shadow of the Moontree.

Dawnpaw gasped and stared up at the magnificent oak. The bright full moon cast its light upon the leaves and lit up the tree like a bolt of lightning. Among its branches sat three cats whose pelts were invisible to her in the shadows. Dawnpaw had to squint to see one of the cats high in the tree; it was so well camouflaged it seemed to be part of the tree itself.

Of course, those must be the other three Clan leaders. SunClan is the last to arrive tonight.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Grayleaf padded up to stand beside her. The gray she-cat's pelt shone silver in the moonlight, and the stars reflected in her eyes. Dawnpaw nodded, at a loss for words.

"I remember the first time I saw it, as an apprentice," Grayleaf went on. "I knew at once that StarClan lived in this place."

"Where shall we sit?" Dawnpaw asked, finally regaining her voice.

Grayleaf flicked her tail toward a small group of cats at the edge of the clearing, separated from the rest. "With the other medicine cats. Come; they will be pleased to meet you."

I hope so, Dawnpaw replied silently as she followed her mentor.

"As a medicine cat, you'll always sit over here." Dawnpaw thought she could detect an apology in Grayleaf's tone. "Which means no sitting with your sister, or the other apprentices."

Dawnpaw shrugged. "It's alright. I expected it." She had known from the beginning that not everything in her and Rosepaw's lives would be as they had once expected.

One cat in the group, a fluffy white tom, stood and dipped his head to Grayleaf. "Greetings," he meowed with friendliness. "We were beginning to think SunClan were not coming tonight!"

"Hello, Palefeather," Grayleaf responded dryly. "We're not late, you're early."

"Who is your companion?" A tabby she-cat gazed curiously at Dawnpaw with huge golden eyes that reminded her of her father's.

"This is my new apprentice, Dawnpaw," Grayleaf mewed, brushing her tail-tip over Dawnpaw's back.

"Ah, I was wondering when you'd finally admit you needed some help!" Palefeather teased.

Grayleaf rolled her eyes. "You're not so far behind in age yourself," she retorted good-humoredly.

"Does the arguing never stop between you two?" A skinny reddish-brown tom shook his head with exasperation. He was sitting beside the golden-eyed she-cat, who blinked kindly at Dawnpaw.

"Forgive those two," she purred. "I swear, they've been bickering since they met as apprentices! I am Leafstripe of MoonClan. It's a pleasure to meet Grayleaf's new apprentice."

"I'm Palefeather of WaterClan," the white tom added.

"I'm Pineshadow," the red tom mewed. "Of FireClan, as you must have guessed."

Dawnpaw looked around. "There are no other apprentices?"

Leafstripe twitched her whiskers. "No. But a new litter of kits was born. I'm thinking of taking one as my apprentice, so you won't be by yourself for long."

"Congratulations!" Grayleaf purred. "How many kits? Is the queen doing okay?"

"Three, and everyone's happy and healthy," Leafstripe reported, her

eyes gleaming with pleasure. "It's always good to see new life in the Clans."

"Indeed," Pineshadow agreed. "One of our queens—"

The FireClan medicine cat was abruptly cut off by a yowl. Dawnpaw looked up to see Adderstar leaning over his branch, his gaze raking over the clearing as he waited for silence.

When the clearing was silent, he meowed, "Every Clan is present. Let the Gathering commence."

Chapter 6

"Who would speak first?" Adderstar prompted, sitting back down on his branch. Dawnpaw's gaze flicked over each of the three other cats seated in the Moontree.

"I will speak for MoonClan first," a she-cat's voice mewed. On the branch above Adderstar, a cat stepped out of the shadows. This was the cat Dawnpaw had trouble seeing earlier. Her fur was dark blue-gray, and her eyes were a deep, dark blue that reflected the starry night beautifully. Dawnpaw was struck by how confident and graceful she appeared.

"That's Juniperstar," Grayleaf breathed in her ear.

Dawnpaw nodded, noticing how her coat resembled a ripe juniper berry.

"Our Clan is thriving," Juniperstar reported. "Three healthy kits, two she-kits and a tom-kit, were born to Spotheart not long ago. And we have a new warrior with us tonight, Snakeclaw."

Dawnpaw saw one cat, a bulky tom with a dark tabby pelt, raise his head proudly. She could see the muscles under his fur. *I wouldn't want to face* him *in a battle,* she thought as all four Clans congratulated him, MoonClan in particular.

Juniperstar nodded, concluding her turn to speak, and melted back into the darkness as smoothly as she had appeared.

The next leader to speak was a lithe gray tom with white freckles and bright green eyes. His pelt was sleek and glossy; Dawnpaw guessed he was the leader of WaterClan.

"Troutstar," Grayleaf murmured.

"WaterClan is thriving as well," Troutstar meowed. "Three kits have become apprentices, and they are with us tonight. Willowpaw,

Gorsepaw, and Duskpaw."

Wow. That's a lot of apprentices all at once!

Dawnpaw could not see the young cats in the crowd, but she cheered their names nonetheless. With a jolt she realized that Adderstar would announce that she and Rosepaw were apprentices too.

Troutstar stepped back and looked expectantly at the two remaining leaders. Adderstar shook his head, leaving the other cat to step forward. It was a pale ginger tabby she-cat, and her flame-colored eyes were slanted. Dawnpaw thought she looked fierce. *A suitable leader for FireClan!*

"That would be Amberstar," Grayleaf said.

"One of our warriors, Mouseclaw, is now expecting kits and has moved to the nursery," Amberstar reported.

Dawnpaw heard a cat mutter behind her. "Those kits will be born just before leaf-bare. Not a good time for kits. I hope they make it."

She twisted her head to see Leafstripe gazing worriedly up at the FireClan leader.

If Amberstar had heard Leafstripe, she gave nothing away. Her eyes raked over the throng of cats below. *I bet she knows as well as the rest of us that the kits will be born at a bad time,* Dawnpaw thought grimly. *She's daring us to say something about it.*

No cat spoke, and Amberstar nodded with a grunt. She glanced at Adderstar, the only remaining leader to speak, and stepped back on her branch in the Moontree.

Adderstar leaned forward and meowed, "I have a warning for the other Clans. We have found prey-stealing rogues on the edge of our territory, near the Twolegplace."

A shocked gasp rippled through the crowd. One cat called, "How long have they been stealing prey?"

"It's hard to tell," Adderstar growled. "One of our warriors found their scent a few days ago. Forestfire, would you mind telling us what exactly you found?"

Dawnpaw caught a glimpse of Forestfire's orange head raised above the other cats.

"I was on a border patrol at the Twolegplace border," she began. "I broke off from the rest of the patrol, and I found a clearing full of scattered prey remains. The place *reeked* of a cat scent I've never smelled before, certainly not Clan or kittypet."

Outraged yowls filled the air. Some cat hissed, "They must be taught a lesson!"

"Yes, and they will be taken care of," Adderstar meowed grimly. "Once we know exactly who we are up against, we will take the fight to them and teach them not to steal from SunClan!"

Cheers of agreement rose up from the SunClan cats.

Adderstar blinked. "In much better news, we have two new apprentices. Rosepaw, and Dawnpaw, who will be training as a medicine cat."

None of the cats could have known where Rosepaw was sitting. But because Dawnpaw was a medicine cat, they all knew exactly where she was seated.

Dawnpaw stared shyly at her paws as she felt the eyes of dozens of cats burning into her pelt. She heard yowls of congratulations, and the SunClan cats cheered, "Rosepaw! Dawnpaw!" She wondered if Rosepaw was soaking up the attention, or shying away like she was.

"That is all I have to report," Adderstar finished. "The Gathering is over."

Immediately the cats below him dissolved into quiet murmurs. The leaders scrambled down from the Moontree to round up their cats. They were followed by their respective deputies, who had sat among the roots of the tree during the Gathering.

"We'll see you at the half-moon meeting!" Palefeather mewed. He gave Dawnpaw a knowing look. "You'll look forward to it, Dawnpaw."

He padded away to join his Clanmates, and the other medicine cats followed, each saying their farewells before disappearing into the crowd.

"The half-moon meeting!" Dawnpaw gasped, turning to Grayleaf. "I had almost forgotten about that."

"You might be a medicine cat apprentice in my eyes," Grayleaf responded, "but at the half-moon you will be an apprentice in StarClan's eyes as well."

A shiver of anticipation coursed through Dawnpaw. Her mentor stalked away, and she quickly scrambled after her, not wanting to get lost in the sea of strange scents and unfamiliar faces.

But her thoughts were oddly drawn to the grave expression on Adderstar's face as he reported the rogues on SunClan's territory, and the fear in Forestfire's voice as she described her findings on the border patrol. Dawnpaw could not help but think that these unknown prey-stealers would bring much more trouble to SunClan than they were worth.

* * *

Dawnpaw sniffed carefully at the ground, keeping her jaws slightly parted. At last she tasted the sharp tang of burdock, and the distinctive scent flooded her nostrils. *I knew there was still some left!* she thought triumphantly.

It was a few days after the Gathering, and Grayleaf had sent Dawnpaw to gather some burdock root for their stocks. It was probably the only plant they were actually running short of.

She nosed aside the undergrowth until she found the burdock plants. Careful not to scratch her paws on the thorns, she dug into the damp earth to find the roots of the plants. When she had completely dug up the roots, Dawnpaw picked up the plants

delicately in her jaws.

I'll bring them back to camp, and Grayleaf will clean up the roots, like she said. Dawnpaw began heading back to camp at a steady trot.

Along the way, her ears pricked at the sound of a ferocious yowl, followed by thundering pawsteps. She couldn't tell who the voice belonged to. The sound came from the training clearing, but she still felt a prickle of fear. *That sounded way too fierce to just be a battle training scuffle!*

She picked up her pace until she was bounding toward the noise. Through her mouthful of burdock she couldn't smell any blood, but she needed to be sure there wasn't a full-scale battle taking place.

Dawnpaw burst through a large bush and found herself skidding to a halt in the middle of the sandy clearing. Panting, she glanced around.

Off to the side, Rosepaw had Pineclaw pinned to the ground, with one paw on his neck but her claws carefully sheathed. Her teeth were bared in a snarl, but her eyes glowed with triumph and amusement. Neither cat seemed to notice Dawnpaw.

"Got you!" Rosepaw growled.

"That was much better!" Pineclaw praised her. "I should be glad I'm not an enemy warrior."

Rosepaw trilled with pleasure and stepped back, letting her mentor stand. "I didn't really hurt you, did I?"

Pineclaw shook his head. "Don't worry about me. I'm going to show you one more move, and then we'll go hunting if you're not too tired."

Rosepaw gave a little bounce. "Oh, I won't be tired! Hunting sounds great."

Pineclaw blinked warmly at his apprentice and opened his mouth to reply. But suddenly his nose twitched, and he spun around, his eyes meeting Dawnpaw's. His tail twitched with slight embarrassment.

"How long have you been there?" he asked with surprise.

Dawnpaw dropped her bundle of herbs. She didn't understand why the red tabby tom was so self-conscious, until she realized that he had already grown to like Rosepaw a lot.

Uh-huh. Don't even try to hide. I can see exactly what you're up to!

Making an effort to keep the laughter out of her voice, she replied, "Oh, really not that long."

"Oh, hi Dawnpaw!" Rosepaw mewed, running over to touch noses with her sister. "What are you doing here? Did you come to watch my battle training?"

"Actually, I was taking those herbs back to camp." Dawnpaw flicked her tail towards the burdock bundle. "I heard a commotion and came over to make sure some cats weren't ripping each other's fur off!"

"Oops," Rosepaw meowed. "I must've sounded pretty vicious, then!"

"You sure did," Pineclaw agreed, padding up to stand beside his apprentice. "Soon you'll have any invaders running for their lives!"

"Well, I'll be on my way back to camp now," Dawnpaw meowed. "See you later, Rosepaw."

"See you," Rosepaw responded.

With a last knowing look at Pineclaw, Dawnpaw snatched up the burdock plants and headed toward the camp.

Well, if Rosepaw isn't padding after Pineclaw, it's obviously the other way around, she thought, purring to herself. If the two did become mates in the long run, Dawnpaw would be very happy for her sister. From what she had seen, Pineclaw was a good cat.

She felt a twinge of regret that, as a medicine cat, she was forbidden from having a mate or kits. That was one thing she hadn't thought of when she first made the decision to become a medicine cat.

But I am responsible for my whole Clan. I may never have a mate, but each and every SunClan cat is like my kit. I will protect them and care for them as if I were their mother. My Clan is the only family I will ever need, and my duty is to them.

Dawnpaw halted, twitching her ears as if flies were buzzing around her. She was amazed with herself for thinking so wisely. Through some strange instinct deep inside her, she glanced around the forest. She gasped as she realized there was a she-cat standing beside a tree a few tail-lengths away, staring right at her. But this was no ordinary cat; not one of her Clanmates. She seemed to only be a shimmering outline, and Dawnpaw could see through her body to the forest beyond.

Did that cat put those words in my head? Whoa...

Dawnpaw blinked, and though her eyes were barely closed for a moment, when she opened them again the strange starry cat was gone. No scent was left behind, not even a single sign that she had ever been there.

Dawnpaw realized she had been holding her breath, and quickly exhaled. She glanced around until she was sure there was nothing else for her to see.

Did I just see my first StarClan cat? she thought with a pounding heart. The she-cat had no scent at all, and had been merely a ghost —her fur had no color or pattern to it. But Dawnpaw knew she had not imagined the warm, wise look in the cat's eyes. She remembered all too well the way her pelt had glittered with all the stars of Silverpelt.

"It had to have been a cat from StarClan," she murmured to herself. Then a jolting thought came into her mind. "I have to tell Grayleaf!"

Gripping the burdock plants firmly in her teeth, she bolted towards the SunClan camp. Her pelt was bristling with excitement, and her paws felt light as air as she raced through the forest.

She burst through the entrance tunnel to the camp, and skidded to a halt when she realized how many cats were out and about. Several

were sitting around, enjoying the warmth sunhigh had brought. Dawnpaw's pelt prickled self-consciously when she felt every cat's gaze trained on her.

Beestripe padded up to her. "Dawnpaw! Are you all right?" the SunClan deputy demanded. "Have you spotted any trouble?"

"No, nothing like that," Dawnpaw meowed quickly. "I just need to speak to Grayleaf. It's urgent."

Without waiting for a response, she headed straight for the medicine den, where she knew her mentor would be waiting for the burdock she had been sent to collect.

Dawnpaw made a beeline for the herb store, which was a collection of holes dug in the soft ground to keep everything fresh. Not yet knowing exactly where to store the burdock plants, she set them down in a shady corner where they wouldn't rot.

"Grayleaf! Grayleaf, are you here?" Dawnpaw couldn't keep the urgency out of her voice. Her mentor had to know what she'd seen!

"Dawnpaw?" The reply came from the tiny hollow Grayleaf made her nest in. Dawnpaw turned to see the spotted gray she-cat emerging from her nest, blinking sleep out of her eyes. "Is some cat injured? Did you get the burdock?"

"Yes, I got the burdock and left it next to the herb store. But that's not important right now. Grayleaf, I saw a *StarClan* cat!"

Instantly her mentor's tired expression was replaced with that of interest.

"Did you have a dream?" she asked.

"No, because I wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of the forest while collecting herbs for you," Dawnpaw snorted.

"Fair enough." Grayleaf sat and wrapped her bushy tail around her paws. "So it was a vision, then?"

"Yes. I saw one she-cat standing beside a tree and staring right at

me. Her eyes were so friendly, but so intense...it was intimidating."

Dawnpaw searched Grayleaf's eyes, trying to gauge her reaction. But Grayleaf wasn't giving anything away easily.

"Is that all you saw?" she prompted.

Dawnpaw nodded. "I blinked, and she just disappeared."

"Did you get to see what she looked like?"

"Her body was transparent, and nothing had color—not her fur or her eyes. There was a blue sparkly mist around her, and she had stars in her fur."

"Well, it was definitely a StarClan cat then." Grayleaf leaned closer. "Did she say anything to you?"

Yes, she did. She spoke to me through my own thoughts and warned me not to think about wanting a mate and kits of my own.

Dawnpaw hated lying to her mentor—who also happened to be a very respected medicine cat—but she felt certain Grayleaf would be furious if she knew Dawnpaw had been thinking about having her own family. Dawnpaw steeled herself before answering.

"No, she said nothing. She just stared at me, and then vanished."

Grayleaf gazed at her paws, deep in thought, and Dawnpaw was relieved that she didn't suspect that she had lied.

"I don't think your vision was anything too important," Grayleaf meowed eventually. "It seems that StarClan just wanted to introduce themselves to their newest medicine cat."

"Do you think I'll see that same cat again at the half-moon meeting?" Dawnpaw gasped.

"I don't know, but it's possible," Grayleaf admitted. "Our ancestors work in mysterious ways. If the cat had said anything to you, I might be more certain."

Again Dawnpaw was painfully aware of her lie, but she convinced herself that it wasn't important anyway. She knew she wouldn't ever fall in love and put her Clanmates at risk.

"Well, on to more important tasks now." Briskly Grayleaf padded over to the herb store. "Help me get these burdock plants into the store, will you?"

Dawnpaw followed her mentor, trying to put the image of the starry she-cat out of her mind. But every time she closed her eyes she saw those intense, glittering eyes that stared right through her, trying to tell Dawnpaw something that she didn't think she was ready to understand.

Chapter 7

Rosepaw charged at Pineclaw, her eyes narrowing as she fixated her gaze on the ground underneath his paws. She lowered her head to slide underneath Pineclaw and unbalance him.

But he had seen the move coming and sidestepped easily, leaving Rosepaw slumped on the ground, her belly pressed against the sandy earth. Quick as lightning, Pineclaw whipped around and leaped on top of her, pinning her in an instant.

"You're so fast!" Rosepaw panted, struggling to speak with the side of her face pressed into the dirt. "How am I supposed to unbalance you if you're always one step ahead of me?"

Pineclaw scrambled off of her, letting her stand. "When you're facing an enemy that's twice your size and much more experienced," he meowed, "they tend to always be one step ahead of you. But you can take them by surprise by tricking them into thinking you're aiming for a totally different spot."

"Okay." Rosepaw leaned closer, excited to learn how to outsmart even the most experienced warriors. "I'll try something!"

Rosepaw stalked toward Pineclaw, her eyes fixed on his shoulder. *This is a common place to attack, so he will already be working out how to dodge it. But he won't know that I have a strategy of my own!*

Wriggling backwards, she leaped, paws outstretched. Just as she expected, Pineclaw took on a defensive position to try and throw off her aim.

As quickly as Pineclaw had dodged last time, Rosepaw dove under him and twisted to that his belly fur brushed her muzzle. She raked her paw through the soft fur, careful to keep her claws sheathed, and softly nipped his hind leg at the same time.

With a yelp of surprise, Pineclaw tried to pull away from her. But

Rosepaw had a firm grip on his leg. With a powerful tug, she pulled Pineclaw's leg out from underneath him. Her mentor lost his footing and collapsed on top of her. She found herself being smothered by his reddish-brown fur.

Yowling with the effort, Rosepaw rolled Pineclaw off of her and sprang on top of him. She pressed her paw to his throat, pinning him once again. Triumph and satisfaction surged through her.

"You're no match for me!" she taunted him playfully.

Pineclaw's eyes gleamed with laughter. "All right, you got me. Now get off!"

Rosepaw used his body to push off of him, landing lightly and spinning around to face him. "How did I do?" she prompted eagerly. *Did I impress you?*

"Brilliantly," Pineclaw answered. "I never saw your move coming, and I don't think an enemy warrior would either!"

Rosepaw felt like she was glowing under her mentor's praise and his warm amber eyes.

"That's enough battle training for today," Pineclaw went on. "How about that hunt I promised you? If you've got the energy, that is!"

Rosepaw puffed out her chest indignantly. "Of course I've got the energy! Let's go." In truth, the battle training had been exhausting, but Pineclaw's praises had given her a burst of energy.

"Let's start at the Sun Oak," Pineclaw suggested. "It's sunhigh, and I'll bet the ground around it is teeming with squirrels."

"Will you teach me how to climb trees after squirrels?" Rosepaw pleaded. That had been one skill that she had been eager to learn ever since she was a kit.

"I'll teach you how to climb trees, yes, but you mustn't try hunting in trees yet," Pineclaw warned. "You'll lose your balance and fall, and probably get hurt badly."

Rosepaw's pelt bristled. "You don't know that! I'm perfectly capable of keeping my balance. You've seen that!"

The serious look in Pineclaw's eyes softened. "I don't want you getting hurt," he murmured, staring deep into her eyes.

Rosepaw blinked, her frustration forgotten. She hadn't realized that her mentor had only been trying to protect her. *I thought he was doubting my skills.*

"Okay," she mewed softly. "If it makes you feel better, I promise I won't hunt in the trees."

Pineclaw nodded. "Good. Now let's not waste any time."

Rosepaw had still not lost her playful mood after the training session. *I'll show you how to not waste time!*

She charged out of the clearing in the direction of the Sun Oak, swerving right past Pineclaw. "Come on!" she yowled over her shoulder. Soon the pounding of paws behind her told her that Pineclaw was in pursuit.

Rosepaw was aware of the forest flitting past her vision. She saw a blur of greens and browns, and felt the wind blasting her pelt as she slipped effortlessly through the undergrowth and leaped over huge tree branches.

I feel so alive! There's no place I'd rather have as my home.

When the huge trunk of the Sun Oak came into sight, Rosepaw stopped abruptly, with Pineclaw skidding to a halt beside her.

"Be quiet from now on," he whispered. "I can already hear prey scuffling about, and we don't want to scare it off."

He was right; Rosepaw detected prey all around them. She heard the undergrowth rustling, she felt tiny steps through the ground, and the enticing scents of mouse and squirrel filled her nose.

Crouching low to the ground, Rosepaw slowly crept into a bush to peek through. Among the roots of the gigantic oak were at least

three squirrels. Two were foraging with their noses sniffing the ground, and one was already nibbling on an acorn.

Rosepaw decided that catching one of the foraging squirrels would be best. They were much more distracted, and they weren't facing her. However, the squirrel that was eating was almost directly facing the bush. She was sure that, if she wasn't downwind right now, it would have detected her.

I'll have to be fast if I want to catch one of them, she warned herself.

Narrowing her eyes, she focused on one of the foraging squirrels. She gathered her weight into her hind legs, and then sprang out of the bush.

As soon as her paws hit the ground, she leaped again, her claws unsheathed and ready to sink into her prey. The squirrel had already started scurrying up the Sun Oak, but Rosepaw was faster. She pinned it against the tree and dispatched it with a quick bite to the neck.

As her prey fell limp beneath her grip, she saw a dark red blur flit past in the corner of her eye. She glanced up to see Pineclaw clawing his way up the tree in pursuit of the other two squirrels.

"Pineclaw! Be careful!" she gasped, not even sure if her mentor had heard her. She watched anxiously as he climbed higher and higher among the branches.

Pineclaw reached up—Rosepaw could see his claws glinting—and gripped one of the squirrels. "Rosepaw! Catch!" he yowled from above, pulling the squirrel off of the tree and sending it flailing towards the ground.

Whoa! Didn't see that part coming!

Rosepaw leaped tremendously high and caught the squirrel right in between her forepaws. She sank her teeth into its throat as she hit the ground, finishing it off.

As she gathered the fresh-kill together, Pineclaw called down, "Nice catch! I would've made the kill myself, but I didn't want to risk

unbalancing myself."

"It's all right," Rosepaw laughed. "I was happy to help." *Thank you, StarClan, for granting us such a good hunt!* she added silently.

"Just give me a minute while I get down from here," Pineclaw went on. "I got a bit carried away and climbed pretty high."

"Be careful!" Rosepaw repeated. She pushed away the image of her mentor tumbling helplessly out of the Sun Oak. *He won't fall. He won't fall.*

She watched with a pounding heart as Pineclaw slowly descended, jumping from branch to branch. She flinched every time a branch cracked beneath his weight, and breathed a sigh of relief when he quickly flung himself onto the tree trunk so he wouldn't fall. *StarClan, don't let him fall!* she prayed.

Rosepaw visibly relaxed when Pineclaw finally made it down, and he landed lightly. She ran up to him and touched her muzzle to his cheek. "Thank StarClan!" she breathed. "I was so scared you would fall."

"I'm here now," Pineclaw reassured her, giving her ear a brief lick. "Do you want to keep hunting or take this back to camp?" He flicked his tail toward the two squirrels they had caught.

"Let's take them back to camp," Rosepaw decided. Silently she added, *I don't think I could concentrate on the hunt after being so frightened!*

Pineclaw nodded and padded towards the fresh-kill, flicking his tail across Rosepaw's ears as he went. Rosepaw instantly felt a little better, remembering how he had done the same thing on her first day as an apprentice. She followed behind him and they each took one squirrel.

Suddenly the undergrowth behind them started rustling madly. They whipped around to see the border patrol—Birchpelt, Thrushtail, Harefoot, and Cherryfur—pushing their way through the bushes.

"There you are!" Thrushtail meowed. "We thought we could smell you nearby."

"Hello, Thrushtail," Pineclaw greeted the senior warrior, dropping his prey. "Everything clear at the borders?"

Behind Thrushtail, Cherryfur spoke up. "We didn't see any intruding cats, but we could certainly smell the rogues at the Twolegplace border." She wrinkled her nose. "It was disgusting!"

Rosepaw's pelt bristled angrily, and she dropped her squirrel too. Were those mangy rogues trespassing *again*?

She glanced at Pineclaw. His tail-tip was twitching in agitation. "How can they steal our prey so often and then never be seen?" he hissed. "I think Adderstar should organize a patrol specifically to scope out the rogues. If he wants to know what we're dealing with, then that's the best way to do it."

Rosepaw felt a flash of pride for her young mentor. *Spoken like a senior warrior, if you ask me!*

Cherryfur nodded slowly. "Makes sense. But Adderstar must approve before we take any action. I think after this he won't want to wait any longer."

"Mind if we come back to camp with you?" Pineclaw meowed. He glanced down at the two dead squirrels. "Rosepaw and I were just finishing up here."

"Sure. Let's go." Cherryfur lashed her tail, and the patrol set off at a steady trot. Rosepaw snatched up her squirrel and quickly followed, with Pineclaw at her heels.

Rosepaw slowed her pace until Pineclaw was beside her. "Do you think Adderstar would let me go on that patrol?" she asked. "I've had quite a bit of battle training."

Pineclaw shook his head. "I don't think so. It's been less than a moon since you were apprenticed, and we don't know how experienced these rogues are at fighting."

Rosepaw lashed her tail in frustration, remembering how Nightpaw had said almost the exact same thing. "Just because I'm young doesn't mean I don't know how to take care of myself," she muttered. "I want to fight for SunClan!"

"I know you do," Pineclaw replied gently. "And Adderstar doesn't think any less of you just because you're young. Why thrust you into battle now when you'll be much more experienced later?"

"Because we'll need all the fighting cats we can get," Rosepaw replied simply, scuffing the ground with one paw as she walked.

"Sulking isn't going to change anything," Pineclaw told her sternly. "You'll just have to accept that you're not fit to fight these rogues just yet. They're vicious, and they will kill in cold blood without a warrior code to stop them."

Rosepaw knew deep down that he was right. But frustration still gnawed at her. *All I want is to fight to keep my Clan safe. That's what a warrior's duty is.*

Again she reminded herself that she was only an apprentice right now, not a warrior. But if she was *training* to be a warrior, then why wasn't she allowed to fight like one?

A little voice inside her mewed, *because you're young, small, and inexperienced. You'd be useless on a battlefield right now.*

Rosepaw sighed inwardly. As much as she hated to admit it, that was the hard truth. Adderstar didn't want her to fight because she wouldn't be helpful. She would have to train hard until her time came to serve her Clan with tooth and claw.

That time isn't now. But still, I just wish things could move faster.

* * *

Rosepaw slipped through the prickly entrance tunnel, paying no mind to the brambles tugging feebly at her fur. She had let the rest of the patrol get ahead, including Pineclaw, who seemed to sense that she wanted to be alone.

She dropped her squirrel on the fresh-kill pile, then looked around for Dawnpaw. Perhaps the close comfort of her sister would help with her mood.

She spotted Dawnpaw padding away from the elders' den and bounded towards her. Dawnpaw looked up as she approached, and to Rosepaw's surprise her amber gaze was clouded, as though something was bothering her. *Maybe there's something wrong with one of the elders?*

"Hi," Rosepaw mewed. "I just noticed you leaving the elders' den. Everything okay with them?"

"Oh, yes. They're fine." Dawnpaw sat down, her eyes still betraying how distracted she was. "So where have you been?"

Rosepaw sat down too. "Battle training and hunting with Pineclaw," she responded, knowing that her sister wasn't even paying attention. Tentatively she asked, "Dawnpaw, is everything alright with you? You seem distracted."

Dawnpaw's head snapped up. She stared into Rosepaw's eyes and opened her mouth as if she was about to say something. But then she closed it again, glanced at her paws, and meowed, "Yeah, I'm okay. Just...tired. Grayleaf's been working my paws off."

Rosepaw felt a wave of sadness. She knew that wasn't really what was bothering Dawnpaw. *I'm your* sister. *Why can't you tell me what's going on?*

"What about you?" Dawnpaw went on. "How are you doing?"

Anger dropped like a cold stone in Rosepaw's belly. She had come to talk to Dawnpaw because she felt like she could confide in her. *But if you refuse to confide in me, then why should I confide in you? Besides, I don't need someone else to tell me I'd be useless in a battle. That's been driven into my head enough today.*

"I've been good," she replied tightly. "Training has been fun." Suddenly unable to bear being close to any cat, she muttered, "I'm going to my den."

Abruptly she sprang to her paws and stalked away, ignoring the feeling of Dawnpaw's questioning stare burning into her from behind.

"Fine, keep your secrets from me," she hissed bitterly to herself. "See if I care."

Rosepaw ducked into the apprentice den and sighed with relief when she found it empty. *The older apprentices must be out training now. Good for them.*

She sunk down into her nest and curled up as tightly as she could, tucking her nose under her tail. Right now all she wanted to do was sleep and ignore everything that was going on around her.

Her Clan assumed she couldn't take care of herself in a fight because she was an apprentice, and refused to let her fight the rogues. And worst of all, her relationship with Dawnpaw was slipping away as they found themselves wrapped up in their separate duties. Rosepaw had never felt so far away from her sister.

Chapter 8

Rosepaw's eyes fluttered open. With her muzzle still tucked under her tail, she looked around the den. Moonlight shone through the entrance, lighting up the sleeping shape of Minnowpaw. Further back, Rosepaw could just make out Nightpaw and Shadowpaw curled up beside each other.

I must've slept through the whole afternoon, and then some!

As quietly as she could, Rosepaw stumbled to her paws and slipped out of the den. She stretched luxuriously in the faint moonlight, feeling much better after her nap.

She glanced up at the sky and realized how low the moon was. Dawn wasn't far off.

I don't think anyone would mind if I went for a walk in the forest, she decided. She knew that apprentices were not allowed out of camp by themselves without permission, but didn't that just make sneaking out all the more exciting?

I won't be doing anything that *wrong, anyway. I'll just slip out, do some hunting, and be back before the dawn patrol leaves. Nobody will even know I was gone!*

But as Rosepaw padded toward the fern tunnel, a familiar voice stopped her in her tracks. "Where are you going?"

She whipped around to see Nightpaw's glowing blue eyes watching her from the shadows of the apprentice den. *Fox dung!* she thought guiltily. *He was just pretending to be asleep.*

"Er, I was just going to make dirt," she lied feebly.

Nightpaw blinked at her and emerged from the den. His eyes gleamed mischievously. "If you're sneaking out of camp, I won't tell anyone," he whispered, twitching his whiskers.

Rosepaw let out the breath she'd been holding. "Thanks," she murmured. *Thank StarClan for that!*

"No problem." Nightpaw shrugged nonchalantly. "But if you plan on not being seen, I wouldn't leave through the fern tunnel. Hazelfrost is on guard duty."

Rosepaw winced at the thought of what the no-nonsense Hazelfrost would do if she caught her sneaking out of the camp.

"How should I slip out, then?" she asked.

"Follow me, and keep silent," Nightpaw mewed. His fur bristled with excitement, and Rosepaw felt a flash of amusement.

She followed him toward the elders' den, not daring to speak for fear of any of the elders hearing them. Nightpaw headed past it until they reached the camp wall, and began sniffing at the base of the wall.

"It should be around here somewhere..." he muttered. "But where? Oh, here it is!" He beckoned Rosepaw with his tail. "Come look at this."

Rosepaw crept forward to see what her friend had found. She stifled a gasp. There was a small hole—just big enough to fit a cat—that led right under the camp wall.

"It leads out into the forest," Nightpaw meowed quietly. "That's your way out."

"How did you know this was here?" Rosepaw asked. *The better question is, how did I* not *know this was here? I used to look for hiding spots all over the camp as a kit!*

"The same day I taught you the hunting crouch, I saw Minnowpaw sneaking out of camp instead of doing the elders' ticks like Thumpstep asked her to," Nightpaw explained. "She used this tunnel."

"Wow. Thanks, Nightpaw!" Rosepaw briefly touched her nose to her friend's ear in gratitude. Then, not thinking twice, she plunged into

the little tunnel and squeezed through it. She clambered out through the other side, and found herself right outside the camp in the moonlit forest.

Scrambling paw steps sounded behind her, and she turned to see Nightpaw following her out of the tunnel.

"What are you doing?"

"Uhh...I'm coming with you?" Nightpaw cocked his head and stared at her like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I'm not missing out on something as exciting as this, you know!"

Rosepaw snorted with laughter. "Let's go, then!"

She bounded off into the forest, with Nightpaw right on her heels. She had never been out in the territory at night; the trees and shadowy bushes loomed in front of her, and the moon cast a faint, eerie light over the ground. It all looked rather spooky to Rosepaw, and she was suddenly grateful that Nightpaw had come with her.

"So what do you wanna do first?" Nightpaw panted as they slowed to a halt beside the Sun Oak.

"Let's do some hunting," Rosepaw mewed. "I'm starving!" *I haven't eaten since before my training session at sunhigh!*

"I bet I'll catch more prey than you," Nightpaw boasted.

"It's a bet, then!" Rosepaw growled playfully. She enjoyed the idea of a friendly night hunting challenge.

"Let's split up to hunt and meet back here, at the Sun Oak," Nightpaw decided.

Rosepaw nodded. "See you then." She whipped around and plunged through the undergrowth, searching for her first kill.

Her ears pricked at the sound of a muffled squeak. She opened her mouth to taste the air, and mouse scent wafted over her tongue. She pinpointed its location, spotting the plump body scrambling about through a clump of ferns. She checked the direction of the wind; it

was blowing softly toward her and away from the mouse. *Perfect.*

Rosepaw crept up to her prey, her paws making no sound as she glided across the forest floor. But suddenly the faint wind changed so that it was carrying her scent toward the mouse. *Oh no!*

Knowing she only had a moment to make the kill, Rosepaw sprang forward and trapped the mouse—squealing in terror—beneath her claws. She sunk her teeth into its neck, felt a tiny bone crunch between her teeth, and watched as her prey fell limp in her jaws instantly.

Nice one! she congratulated herself. *Let's see if I can keep this up.* She kicked earth over her catch and left it behind to collect later.

As she padded through the dark forest, Rosepaw felt growing confidence in her knowledge of the territory. Not only did it look familiar to her during the day—now it looked familiar at night as well. Her earlier uneasiness had vanished.

She wondered idly how Nightpaw was getting on. *He must be doing great. His pelt blends into the shadows better than any cat's could. I can see why he was named after the night!*

Rosepaw jumped at the sudden squawking of a bird very close by. She quickly crouched low to the ground and glanced around, jaws parted to drink in any scents.

She could smell another mouse, and felt a surge of excitement as she recognized the bird scent as a raven. *That will make for an amazing catch!* she thought. *Nightpaw will be so impressed.*

Rosepaw tracked the scent through a holly bush, and settled into a crouch to peek out through the leaves.

She spotted the mouse in an instant, but almost right after she saw it, the raven dove down from a nearby tree and gripped the rodent in its talons.

Rosepaw stifled a gasp. *Great StarClan, that raven is huge!*

The mouse squealed in terror. It writhed beneath the raven's grip,

and then was still. The bird squawked in triumph, and spread its wings to carry its food away.

Rosepaw charged from the cover of the holly bush, and leaped right on top of the bird. It immediately began thrashing beneath her claws in an effort to escape, and Rosepaw was astonished at the strength of its struggles. She fought to keep her grip. The raven managed to twist its head around, and it stabbed its sharp beak into her paw.

Rosepaw hissed furiously, holding fast despite the searing pain that shot up her leg. *All right, that's enough!*

She quickly bit into the raven's throat, jerking her head sideways so its neck snapped. The bird's struggles instantly subsided.

"Wounded by your own prey," Rosepaw scoffed to herself, glancing at her bleeding paw. "What kind of hunter are you, huh?"

She scrambled off of the dead raven, and in spite of her messy kill she felt a surge of triumph. *That's two mice and a raven! I hope I can carry it all back to the Sun Oak.*

Luckily, the raven's mouse was rather small, and Rosepaw was able to tuck it under her chin while she collected the raven in her mouth. She stumbled back towards the meeting spot, trying not to put much weight on her injured foot. She decided she would make another trip to get the second mouse.

At last she reached the Sun Oak, and with a grunt of relief she let the mouse and the raven fall to the ground.

Rosepaw glanced around. Nightpaw was nowhere to be seen, but there was now a small pile of fresh-kill at the base of the Sun Oak. *Two mice, and a squirrel too. Not bad!*

"Nightpaw?" Rosepaw mewed, scanning the clearing. "Where are you? I can see the prey you caught."

Maybe he left to go get something else he caught? Rosepaw tasted the air. Nightpaw's scent was fresh and strong, and the breeze was gone now. *No. He's very close by.*

"I can smell you nearby," she called, rolling her eyes. "I know you're around here somewhere, mouse-brain!"

Suddenly a shadow fell over her, but before she had time to react something heavy fell on top of her, flattening her to the ground. Her injured paw screeched in protest as it folded beneath her.

Nightpaw's scent flooded her nose, and his voice breathed in her ear, "Mouse-brained yourself! Didn't think to look in the trees, did you?"

Rosepaw tried in vain to slide out from under him. "Get off me!" she protested.

"Do you really think your enemy would just let you get up if you asked him to?" Nightpaw asked.

"Oh, so you're my enemy now?" Rosepaw rolled her eyes again, but this time in amusement rather than exasperation. "I'll show you what I'd do to my enemy!"

She managed to twist around so that she and Nightpaw were nose-to-nose. She flashed her paw across his face, and he drew back, stunned. His grip slackened, and Rosepaw used her hind legs to push herself away from him. She rolled back onto her belly and sprang to her paws, whipping around to face Nightpaw again.

The black apprentice leaped at Rosepaw, but she easily sidestepped. *He's bulky, which makes him way slower than me,* she observed. *A good advantage over him.*

She sprang at Nightpaw while he was still scrambling back to his paws. She swiped both of his ears, and sprang backwards as he tried to counter. His paws raked empty air.

"Too slow!" Rosepaw purred.

"Just wait till I get my paws on you again," Nightpaw hissed playfully.

"I'll be waiting for a long time, then!"

"It'll be sooner than you think!" Nightpaw charged at her again.

Rosepaw decided to use a move that Pineclaw had showed her during their training session. She leaped high into the air, dodging Nightpaw, who had slid to a halt below her. She twisted mid-air and landed neatly square on her friend's shoulders, completely squashing him.

Yes! Perfect!

"Mouse dung!" Nightpaw spat under her. "I should've seen that move coming."

"Apprentices as young as me usually don't know that move yet," Rosepaw pointed out. "Pineclaw's been speeding up my battle training." She stepped off of Nightpaw, who stumbled to his paws.

He nodded. "Because of the rogues, I'd bet."

Rosepaw flexed her claws. "I don't know why he bothers. He doesn't even *want* me to fight the rogues. Nobody does." The anger she had felt before was rising up again.

Nightpaw blinked sympathetically at her. "It won't be long before you're allowed to fight," he meowed.

"The rogues will have been driven out by the time that happens!" Rosepaw hissed. "I know it's wrong for me to *want* trouble for SunClan, so I can fight, but I just...I..." She trailed off helplessly.

"You want to prove yourself to the Clan," Nightpaw guessed.

Rosepaw sighed, relieved that *someone* understood how she felt. "Exactly."

"There are different ways to prove your worth to SunClan," Nightpaw reasoned. "Focus hard on your training. Volunteer for some patrols. The Clan will see that you're always willing to help, I promise."

"I suppose," Rosepaw murmured. She glanced at the prey they'd caught, ready to change the subject. "You hunted well. I wouldn't

have expected to find a squirrel out so early."

"I think you won the contest," Nightpaw responded, his eyes shining with admiration as he gazed at the raven. "It's not every day you catch something as fierce as a raven!"

"I caught a second mouse, too, but I left it under some dirt."

"I'll go fetch it later if you'd like."

"Thanks."

Nightpaw glanced up at the sky. "We should be heading back to camp now. The dawn patrol will be leaving soon."

"Right," Rosepaw mewed. "Let's hurry, then." She gathered her mouse and raven, and Nightpaw snatched up his squirrel and mice. They set off back to camp side by side.

"You're limping," Nightpaw observed along the way.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Rosepaw replied sarcastically. "The raven managed to peck my paw before I killed it."

"Ouch." Nightpaw winced. "Just like I said, ravens are fierce creatures!"

Just as the camp wall came into sight, a yowl sounded from inside. It was so distorted with pain that Rosepaw couldn't tell who it belonged to. Her heart lurched.

"What was that about?" Nightpaw gasped. He raced right towards the camp entrance, and Rosepaw followed him, not caring that they were supposed to be returning through the secret tunnel. Hazelfrost was gone from her post, and the entrance was unguarded.

When they burst through the fern tunnel, Rosepaw was surprised to find the clearing already full of cats. Quickstorm and Thrushtail were sitting beneath the Cliffrock, murmuring anxiously to each other. Robinfeather and Deerdapple, two young warriors, sat in the center of the clearing with their eyes fixed on the nursery. Shinefur and Ebonypelt were nearby, their eyes clouded with sympathy.

Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw were whispering to each other by the apprentices' den. Beestripe sat rigid outside the nursery as if he was standing guard.

What's going on? Rosepaw thought in confusion. She followed Nightpaw to the fresh-kill pile, where they hurriedly deposited their prey. Another pained yowl rose into the air, and she flinched.

Rosepaw was beginning to think no cat had even noticed them enter camp, when she saw Hazelfrost stalking toward them.

"Great," Nightpaw muttered. "She'll probably claw our ears off now."

"Where have you two been?" Hazelfrost demanded, her eyes like chips of ice.

"Early hunting," Rosepaw replied promptly, waving her tail towards their contribution to the fresh-kill pile.

"Not bad," Hazelfrost grunted. "I never saw you leave, though." Her gaze flicked from Rosepaw to Nightpaw suspiciously.

"What's going on here?" Nightpaw asked, ignoring Hazelfrost's accusing tone before she could ask any more questions.

The brown tabby warrior's eyes narrowed, and she glanced toward the nursery. She answered, "Rainfoot's kits are coming."

Chapter 9

Dawnpaw ran as fast as her paws could carry her. Her heart was pounding fearfully, and her breath came in gasps. The furious screeching of fighting cats sounded once more behind her, only imploring her to run faster. *I have no battle training yet!* she thought in horror. *Whoever those cats are, they would rip me to shreds.*

Part of Dawnpaw knew she should be running *towards* the battle, using her medicinal skills to heal those who were wounded. But fear and instinct had overpowered her rational thinking, and so she kept running. The landscape around her was blurred, and she didn't even know where she was, who the fighting cats were, or where she was running to. She didn't stop to figure it out.

Above all the hissing and spitting, a pained, frightened yowl rose into the air. It was incoherent, merely a sound of pure helplessness.

And in that instant Dawnpaw knew that she *had* to help.

Her eyes flew open, and she found herself back in her nest in the medicine den, her paws flailing in the air. She stilled herself, breathing deeply to steady her pounding heart.

The memory of the dream was already fading, when suddenly Dawnpaw heard another yowl of pain.

Exactly like the one in her dream, except this was no dream.

Wide awake now, Dawnpaw leaped to her paws and bounded over to Grayleaf. Her mentor was already awake and rising to her paws.

"You heard it too?" Dawnpaw panted.

"Yes," Grayleaf replied grimly. "And it sounded like Rainfoot. I think her kits are coming at last."

Dawnpaw gasped. "It's not too early, is it?"

Grayleaf made a beeline for the herb store and began sifting through the leaves and berries. "The kits are right on time," she meowed reassuringly. "But Rainfoot sounds very distressed; she'll need more than medicinal assistance."

"Perhaps I should fetch Patchflower, or Shinefur," Dawnpaw suggested. The two she-cats were both experienced queens. Patchflower was Dawnpaw and Rosepaw's mother, while Shinefur gave birth to Shadowpaw and Minnowpaw.

"Yes, that's a good idea," Grayleaf agreed. "Go and wake Patchflower. She gave birth more recently, so she'll have a clearer idea of what Rainfoot's going through."

Dawnpaw nodded briskly and raced out of the medicine den, toward the warrior den.

She wasn't surprised when she ducked into the den to find cats already stirring. *Rainfoot's yowl was loud enough to scare all the prey from here to the Moontree.*

Patchflower raised her head, her luminous green eyes glittering with worry. "Dawnpaw?" she meowed. "Rainfoot is kitting, isn't she? That was her yowling."

Dawnpaw nodded, forcing herself to stop trembling. "Yes," she replied. "And she's going to need your help."

Patchflower nodded briskly. "I know what to do. You just go and help Grayleaf."

Dawnpaw nodded again and raced out of the den. She spotted Grayleaf ducking into the nursery just as Rainfoot screeched again. Her heart twisted with sympathy. *I don't think average kittings are this painful,* she thought anxiously. *I hope nothing goes wrong. StarClan, protect Rainfoot!*

Dawnpaw followed her mentor into the nursery. At one end of the den, Rainfoot was splayed out in her nest, panting hard. Grayleaf was bent over her calmly, murmuring gentle encouragement.

"The first kit will be born soon. You're doing fantastic; nothing's

wrong. Just keep pushing, Rainfoot."

"Patchflower is on her way," Dawnpaw reported. She kept her distance, knowing that she wouldn't be much help as such a young apprentice. *But I need to watch so I can learn what to do.*

"Good, thank you," Grayleaf replied, not taking her eyes off Rainfoot. She placed one paw on the kitting queen's rippling flank. "There's a very big lump here. I'd say three, maybe even four kits."

No wonder it hurts so much, Dawnpaw thought. *That's quite a lot of kits!* "Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

"Get some cat to guard the nursery entrance. I don't want every cat in the Clan trying to see what's going on."

"What about Birchpelt? Is he allowed in?" It made sense that the father of the kits would be allowed in the nursery.

"Not even Birchpelt," Grayleaf ordered briskly. "When Patchflower gets here, it will be too crowded for him to be here too."

Dawnpaw nodded and stepped out of the den. Several cats were already up and about, exchanging anxious mews. She spotted the pale ginger coat of Birchpelt pushing his way through the crowd towards her.

"Dawnpaw! How's Rainfoot?" he demanded. "Is she okay? There are no issues, right?"

"Rainfoot is doing great," Dawnpaw reassured him. "She's in pain, but it's completely normal."

"Let me see her, then!" Birchpelt tried to push past Dawnpaw, but she made sure not to let him through.

"I'm sorry, Grayleaf says you're not allowed inside until the kitting is over," Dawnpaw explained. She felt uneasy at the idea of giving orders to a cat that was many moons older than her.

Birchpelt's eyes blazed with anger. "I'm the *father* of the kits!" he hissed. "I have to know for myself if Rainfoot is all right. I have to

see her."

Dawnpaw took a deep breath. *You're a medicine cat,* she told herself. *He'll listen to your reasoning.*

"Patchflower will be helping. Between her, Rainfoot, Grayleaf and I, the nursery will already be crowded as is, without you in there as well." Dawnpaw was surprised at how firm her voice sounded, but she didn't show it.

Birchpelt glared at her a moment longer, then sighed and dipped his head. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm just so nervous."

Dawnpaw blinked sympathetically. "You'll be just fine. You'll be a wonderful father for these kits, and I know Rainfoot would agree with me."

"Thanks, Dawnpaw," Birchpelt responded. His sky-blue eyes began to shine with excitement at the prospect of being a father.

Dawnpaw dipped her head. Tortoiseshell fur flitted past her vision, and she glanced sideways to see Patchflower entering the nursery with a short, thick twig in her jaws. Dawnpaw wondered curiously what the stick was for.

Birchpelt had padded away to speak briefly with Robinfeather and Deerdapple. Now Beestripe was approaching her. "Is there any way I can help?" the deputy asked.

"Actually, yes," Dawnpaw answered. "Can you guard the nursery entrance? Grayleaf doesn't want anyone barging in."

Beestripe nodded. "Of course." He stationed himself beside the entrance.

Having done what Grayleaf had asked of her, Dawnpaw headed back inside the nursery. Patchflower was now beside Grayleaf, crouching over Rainfoot.

"Hold the stick in your mouth," the patched she-cat was saying. "Just bite down on it when you feel pain. It helps, and makes a lot less noise."

Rainfoot nodded, still panting, and picked the stick up from the ground.

Smart idea, Dawnpaw thought. *It must be a common thing to do during kitting.*

Grayleaf noticed Dawnpaw lingering at the entrance and waved her tail. "You may come closer if you like," the medicine cat meowed. "The first kit is about to be born."

Dawnpaw inched closer with quiet excitement. She was about to witness new life be born into the Clan! *These kits shall grow into strong, loyal warriors.*

Rainfoot's flank rippled powerfully, and her teeth clamped down on the stick with a muffled groan. The queen squeezed her eyes shut, and suddenly a tiny, wet bundle of fur slid out from under her tail. Dawnpaw gasped.

"Fantastic," Grayleaf purred encouragingly to Rainfoot. "Your first kit has been born. Only a few more to go." She gently lifted the newborn kit and passed it to Patchflower, who began licking the kit rapidly.

She's warming it up by drying its fur off, Dawnpaw observed.

Rainfoot opened her eyes and gazed at her firstborn. In spite of the pain Dawnpaw knew she was feeling, her golden eyes glowed with a mixture of pride and love.

Then her next contraction came, and she bit down on the stick again. Another little bundle slipped out onto the mossy nest.

"Dawnpaw, you can take this one." Grayleaf placed the kit in front of her. "Just lick its fur the wrong way until it's nice and dry, and breathing steadily."

Dawnpaw nodded and began rasping her tongue over the little newborn.

"The firstborn is a she-cat!" Patchflower announced, her eyes shining as if the kit was her own. "Congratulations, Rainfoot."

The smoky gray queen let out a throaty purr, her eyes betraying how exhausted she already was. Her flank rippled strongly once more, but no kit came out this time.

"Come on, Rainfoot," Patchflower coaxed gently. "Just push a little harder. You're almost done."

"She needs more strength," Grayleaf murmured worriedly, nosing through the bundle of herbs she had brought. She pulled out a few round, dark blue berries.

"Juniper berries, right?" Dawnpaw asked. "Good for strength, bellyache, and for cats who are having trouble breathing."

"Exactly right," Grayleaf praised her. She turned back to Rainfoot. "Go on, eat these. They'll give you enough strength for the last kit, or kits."

Rainfoot nodded weakly, letting the stick fall from her mouth, and obediently licked up the berries.

Dawnpaw gazed warmly down at the kit still at her paws. "This one's a tom!" she exclaimed.

"Give him to me, so he can be with his sister," Patchflower mewed.

Dawnpaw passed the tom-kit to her, and watched with wonder as the two kits squirmed, already letting out faint mewls.

Rainfoot yowled again as her next contraction came, and the third kit slid out. Patchflower took it and began licking it.

"Is that the last one?" Dawnpaw asked.

Grayleaf pushed her nose into Rainfoot's flank. "Only one more to go," she replied. To the gray queen she added, "You can do it, Rainfoot. Just one more push..."

With a final groan, Rainfoot heaved, and the fourth kit was born.

"Well done," Patchflower purred. "Very well done. You can rest now."

Rainfoot sighed with relief, visibly relaxing. She watched lovingly as Patchflower and Dawnpaw warmed up the kits.

The third born had been another tom, and the last kit was another she-cat. Now they were all lined up against Rainfoot's belly, suckling eagerly. Their mother looked on with sleepy but shining eyes.

Dawnpaw couldn't tear her eyes away from the kits. "Oh, they're so beautiful!" she breathed. "Four little warriors for SunClan."

"And they're all perfectly healthy," Patchflower added happily.

"Can...can you bring Birchpelt in?" Rainfoot murmured. "I want him to see the kits now."

Grayleaf nodded at Patchflower, who bounded out of the nursery to find Rainfoot's mate.

Then Grayleaf looked at Dawnpaw. "You did very well, taking care of the kits," she meowed. "Go get something to eat from the fresh-kill pile. You deserve it."

Dawnpaw was warmed from ears to tail-tip by her mentor's praise. "I will. Thanks, Grayleaf." She padded out of the nursery just as Birchpelt pushed his way in.

"Rainfoot, are you..." the ginger warrior's voice died away, and Dawnpaw could sense his joy. "Wow...how can they be so perfect? They're *beautiful*."

"You have two sons and two daughters." Dawnpaw could just hear Rainfoot's response, thick with emotion. The two cats' purrs faded as she trotted away from the nursery, towards the prey pile.

Part of her longed to have such a strong connection with another cat—to love another cat the way Rainfoot loved Birchpelt. And maybe even have kits. But this was the way of life she had left behind when she turned her paws on the path of a medicine cat, and she knew she could not turn away from the path now.

I love healing. I love helping to bring new life into the world. And I love

how close I am to StarClan. I couldn't possibly give all of that up!

Dawnpaw only wished that the way of the medicine cats wasn't so strict, even though it made sense that they were forbidden to have a mate or kits.

No one ever told me it would be easy. But I didn't think it would be this hard.

Just as she began to sift through the fresh-kill, something shimmered at the edge of her vision. She turned to look, and gasped when she saw a spirit standing at the edge of the clearing, near the medicine den. Blue mist wreathed around its paws, and its transparent fur glittered with starlight.

Dawnpaw realized this was not just any StarClan cat. This was the she-cat who had appeared for an instant while she had been gathering herbs in the forest. She couldn't forget the intensity of the spirit's gaze as it pierced her fur.

"Dawnpaw," she whispered. "Come."

Dawnpaw glanced around nervously, wondering if any of her Clanmates could see the starry cat.

As if reading her mind, the spirit shook her head. "Your Clanmates cannot see me. Only you can. Come with me; I have something to show you." She turned and padded into the medicine den, leaving a thin trail of mist in her wake. Awestruck and curious, Dawnpaw followed her.

To her surprise, there was now a large, round puddle of clear water in the center of the den. *This was never here before,* she thought in alarm.

"Look carefully, Dawnpaw," the spirit murmured with her eyes fixed on the water. "Look carefully, and you will see what I wish to share with you."

Dawnpaw stared hard at the center of the puddle. Suddenly the water began to ripple, though there was not the slightest breeze to disturb it. But her paws were rooted to the ground; she could not

move away.

In the water, she saw four cats standing side by side in the middle of a lush forest. At first, Dawnpaw didn't recognize them, but suddenly she knew them as Rainfoot's four kits, many moons in the future. Their pelts were sleek and shiny, barely concealing the hard muscle that was underneath. Their eyes shone as they stared into the distance.

"These are the cats who will be," the StarClan she-cat mewed, "if they are saved."

"Saved?" Dawnpaw echoed. "What do you mean? Saved from what?" Her heart began to pound.

"The kits' lives will be at risk." The spirit's tone and expression betrayed how urgent her message was. "You must be prepared, or they will be lost."

"What do you mean?" Dawnpaw cried. "What's going to happen? *When* will it happen?"

The starry cat shook her head sadly. "I cannot tell you any more," she responded as her shape began to dispel.

"Wait!" Dawnpaw begged. "Please, at least tell me your name."

The fading spirit blinked. "My name is Violetsky," she whispered, her voice like a soft breeze. Then she was gone, just like the last time, with no trace of her left over. The puddle had vanished.

"Dawnpaw! What are you staring at the ground for?"

Dawnpaw jumped, and glanced up to see Grayleaf staring at her, puzzled. *Should I tell her about Violetsky's message?*

She decided she wouldn't say anything. She didn't want to worry her Clan by telling them the kits might die, with no idea when it would happen. *I'll just have to keep a sharp eye out myself.*

"Dawnpaw!" Grayleaf sounded impatient. "Have you turned deaf?"

"No," Dawnpaw mewed quickly. "I'm just tired, sorry. I think I need more sleep."

"Go to your nest, then." Grayleaf padded over to the herb store, deposited the herbs she had not used, and walked right back out.

Dawnpaw curled up in her nest, her mind whirling. Who *was* Violetsky? And why did she keep coming to visit her? *Maybe she was part of SunClan before she died, and she's just looking out for us.*

As she drifted off into sleep, Dawnpaw felt that the half-moon meeting could not come soon enough. If she wanted answers to her questions, then that was where she would find them.

Chapter 10

Rosepaw padded along beside Nightpaw at the back of the patrol, her pelt idly brushing his. It was the day after Rainfoot's kits were born, and she had volunteered for a hunting patrol at dawn. Nightpaw had come along as well, and they were patrolling with their mentors, Pineclaw and Thrushtail, plus Forestfire and Willowstripe.

Thrushtail, the head of the patrol, halted. He turned to face the rest of the cats. "Let's split up and do some partner hunting," he meowed. "Rosepaw will go with Pineclaw, and Nightpaw with me. Forestfire and Willowstripe will go together."

Rosepaw felt a twinge of excitement. She was ready to show Pineclaw just how good of a hunter she'd become! She bounded over to stand beside her mentor.

"Where do you think we should hunt?" Pineclaw prompted.

It's a test to see how I think during the hunt.

"Perhaps we should look around the watering hole near the FireClan border," she answered. "It's getting hotter as the sun comes up, and the prey will want some water."

Pineclaw looked impressed. "Great idea. Just try not to get too close to the boundary. FireClan can be overly suspicious, to say the least!"

Rosepaw nodded obediently, and followed him as he led the way to the FireClan border.
Suddenly Pineclaw veered to the left. "This way."

They nosed their way through a thick swath of ferns and found themselves in a small clearing, with the pond in the center.

"Here we are." Pineclaw scanned the clearing with his ears pricked. He lowered his voice. "Find a spot to hide, and wait until something

shows up."

Rosepaw nodded eagerly and wiggled into the most lush clump of ferns she could find. Their fresh scent wreathed around her until she could hardly smell anything else.

She watched Pineclaw in surprise as he rolled in some of the sticky mud beside the pond. Then he brushed against the undergrowth until the leaves stuck to his fur, covering up his reddish coat.

Rosepaw couldn't keep in her laughter. "You look like a walking bush!" she purred.

Pineclaw rolled his eyes with amusement. "It will disguise my scent *and* help me camouflage," he mewed.

"It still looks funny to me." Yet Rosepaw couldn't help admiring her mentor's cleverness. He settled across from her in a bush, and only his sharp amber eyes were visible now.

Rosepaw kept her jaws parted to taste any prey-scent nearby. But all she could smell was ferns and FireClan's stench, and she felt a pang of frustration. She resisted the urge to move, not wanting to scare away anything that might be nearby.

Suddenly she noticed Pineclaw's eyes narrow, and she tasted a hint of vole. She spotted it scurrying towards the pond, and pausing to quickly lap up a few drops.

Pineclaw sprang from cover the instant the vole was distracted, and landed squarely on top of it with unsheathed claws. He nipped its spine quickly, and it was dead as quickly as it had appeared.

"That was brilliant!" Rosepaw gasped. "You were so quick, like a bolt of lightning."

Pineclaw blinked proudly at his catch, then froze. He lifted his muzzle, nose twitching, toward the FireClan border. Tentatively Rosepaw slithered out of the ferns, wondering what Pineclaw had scented.

Her mentor's eyes blazed with surprise. "The FireClan stench is so

strong! But we're at least several fox-lengths from the border..."

"Do you think some cat crossed the border?" Rosepaw asked. She sniffed the air for herself, and she almost stumbled backwards when she realized how much stronger the rival Clan's scent had become.

"I wouldn't put it past FireClan," Pineclaw growled. "Follow me; keep your head down and stay quiet."

Rosepaw crept forward behind Pineclaw, her heart pounding. Did a cat cross on accident? Or was FireClan deliberately invading their territory? She flexed her claws and tensed her muscles, prepared for a fight if the situation demanded one.

Her ears pricked at the sound of a thrush's alarm call, abruptly cut off by a flurry of rustling. She stifled a furious hiss. The intruding cats were *hunting* on SunClan territory!

Go find your own prey! Why is SunClan's prey better than everyone else's? First the rogues, and now another Clan!

Pineclaw's muddy fur was bristling; clearly he was just as angry as she was. He stalked up to a mouse hole dug between the roots of a tree, and carefully sniffed it. His head snapped up. "This way," he hissed quietly. "Whoever is stealing our prey, they're close by."

Rosepaw began to pick up scents of blood, mingled with FireClan's stink. *The prey the intruders killed, perhaps,* she thought.

But when she stopped beside Pineclaw to peer through a holly bush, she was caught by surprise.

As far as she could tell, there was only one intruding cat. A small mottled tabby—an apprentice, by the look of him—was crouched over a dead thrush. His golden eyes gleamed with triumph as he gulped down his prey, and his plumed tail flicked side to side with contempt.

Rosepaw fought the tempting urge to spring out of hiding and slash this dumb cat's ears. *An apprentice from another Clan, killing* and *eating prey on our territory!* She could hardly believe the arrogance of this cat!

Purring to himself, the tabby tom muttered, "Stupid SunClan cats. They don't even know how to patrol their borders. I could hunt here all day and they wouldn't give a mousetail!"

"Is that so?"

Pineclaw stepped out of the holly bush and stalked toward the trespasser, who started with surprise.

"Keep hunting here, and I won't even need a mousetail to claw your ears and send you back to your side of the border," Pineclaw hissed.

The FireClan cat sneered. "Whatever. I could beat you single-pawed. There's only one of you!"

"Correction: there's *two* of us." Rosepaw slipped out of the bush to stand beside her mentor. It would have been much easier to just chase this cat off of her territory, but she held her ground. FireClan was to blame in this situation, and attacking this arrogant apprentice would make FireClan seem like the victims instead.

"You're hardly my size!" The tabby rolled his eyes. "Taking care of you would be no problem."

"Oh, I'd like to see you try," Rosepaw retorted, starting to lose her patience. *Where in the name of StarClan is this cat's mentor? Not even Minnowpaw would ever act this arrogant!*

"Trust me, I want to claw his ears as much as you do," Pineclaw breathed in her ear. "But we must stay calm, and escort him back to where he came from."

Rosepaw nodded reluctantly.

Pineclaw turned back to the FireClan apprentice. "We're taking you back to your camp," he meowed. "I'd like to see what your mentor—and Amberstar—will think about this!"

"You're not taking me anywhere!" the apprentice hissed indignantly. With a yowl he sprang at Pineclaw.

Rosepaw prepared to spring to her mentor's defense, but Pineclaw

raised one paw and landed a blow—with his claws sheathed—on the side of the tabby's head, sending him reeling backwards. Icily calm, he said, "Don't try that again."

Rosepaw stifled a *mrrow* of laughter. *Actually, I'd love to see him try again!*

The tabby apprentice snarled at Pineclaw, but didn't move. He sat down, staring at his paws sulkily.

"Now, we're going to—" Pineclaw's mew was drowned out by another voice, coming from FireClan's border.

"Sootpaw? Sootpaw! Where in the name of StarClan did you go?"

"I don't suppose your name is Sootpaw?" Pineclaw asked the FireClan cat dryly. "Come, let's get you back to your own territory now."

Sootpaw glared mutinously at the red warrior, then got to his paws and stalked towards FireClan territory. Pineclaw and Rosepaw followed behind him.

As they approached the border, Pineclaw called, "I think we've found your missing apprentice!"

As if in response, the undergrowth on FireClan's side of the border began to tremble. Three cats stepped out—a golden tabby she-cat, a brown-and-white splotched tom, and a solid black tom.

"What's this?" the black tom demanded.

"Sootpaw—" Pineclaw waved his tail at the dusty brown tom, "—was on SunClan territory. He killed and ate a thrush."

The black cat's amber eyes narrowed to slits and blazed like fire. His scathing gaze turned on Sootpaw. "Is this true?" he hissed softly.

Sootpaw merely shrugged and glared at his paws silently.

"I should put you on tick duty for the rest of your apprenticeship for this," the older cat growled. Rosepaw realized he must be Sootpaw's

mentor. "What next? Convincing the other apprentices to attack another Clan?"

"It was only one bird," Sootpaw protested. "They have plenty more to spare. I didn't harm any cat!"

"I don't *care* whether they have prey to spare." Sootpaw's mentor thrust his head down so he was a whisker-length from his apprentice's face. "You have broken the clearest rule of the warrior code, and I'll make sure you're punished for it." He nodded briskly to the other members of his patrol. "Brightpetal, Patchwhisker. Take Sootpaw straight to Amberstar and make sure she knows exactly what happened."

As the two warriors padded away, flanking a grumbling Sootpaw, the black tom turned back to the SunClan cats.

"Pineclaw, I'm very sorry about my apprentice," he meowed. "He has a lot to learn about his place in the Clan."

"It's all right, Shadetail," Pineclaw responded. "Sootpaw was right, actually; the prey *is* running well in SunClan."

Shadetail shook his head. "I should still repay what Sootpaw stole. I'll be back in just a moment." He vanished back into the undergrowth.

"You know that warrior?" Rosepaw asked curiously.

"I've met him a few times at Gatherings," Pineclaw explained. "He's been a warrior a while longer than me, and he's a fine cat."

"He must be, if he's willing to give FireClan prey to SunClan just because one bird was stolen," Rosepaw pointed out.

"That's the respectful thing to do. Any other cat would do the same." Pineclaw watched the undergrowth for Shadetail's return.

Soon enough the dark warrior returned with a mouse clamped in his jaws. He laid it at the border and pushed it to SunClan's side with one paw.

"There you go," he mewed. "Sorry again!"

"Thanks, Shadetail," Pineclaw purred. "See you at the next Gathering, hopefully?"

"Hopefully," Shadetail replied, and dove back through the bushes.

"Let's go get that vole," Pineclaw meowed. "You can carry the mouse."

As they trekked back towards the pond where Pineclaw's vole had been left, Rosepaw wondered what it was like to have friends in another Clan. The warrior code told her that it was alright to have friends in different Clans, as long as she was still loyal to her Clan above anything else.

She tried to imagine Nightpaw in a different Clan, and still being good friends with him. *But what if tensions between our Clans rose? What if we had to battle each other? Could I really bring myself to attack Nightpaw with claws unsheathed?*

Rosepaw knew she could never do that. But then she would be breaking the warrior code. She would receive serious punishment from Adderstar—perhaps even exile. And she didn't even *want* to imagine being driven out of the Clan she had dedicated her life to.

I would never wish that on Pineclaw, she thought, gazing at her kind, gentle mentor up ahead. *I hope he never has to meet Shadetail in battle.*

As Pineclaw collected his vole, Rosepaw decided that she would be better off staying close to her own Clanmates. As far as she could tell, befriending cats of different allegiances could only lead to trouble in the end.

* * *

Rosepaw halted at the entrance to the medicine cat den. She wanted to try and talk to her sister again, now that she was in a better mood. *And hopefully, so is Dawnpaw.*

She brushed through the lichen that cloaked the entrance, and

looked around. The scents of a variety of herbs—sweet and bitter—wreathed around her, along with hints of Grayleaf and Dawnpaw. Rosepaw spotted the dark gray she-cat at one end of the den, making bundles of herbs she didn't recognize.

"Hi, Grayleaf."

"Oh, Rosepaw." Grayleaf glanced over her shoulder. "I didn't notice you come in. Something wrong?"

"No, I'm just looking for Dawnpaw."

Grayleaf angled her fluffy ears, pointing toward the dimly lit back of the den. "She's by the herb store," the medicine cat replied. "I've got her on sorting duty."

"Thanks." Rosepaw padded towards the area where the scent of herbs was strongest. She found her cream-furred sister hunched over a bundle of leaves, murmuring to herself.

"Okay, not much dock left...we could do with some more chervil, too..."

"Dawnpaw? Can we talk?" Rosepaw asked uncertainly.

Dawnpaw looked up from her work, blinking with surprise, as if she hadn't expected her sister to visit. "Oh. Sure, I just finished up here." She scraped the herbs back into their separate storeholes and sat down. "So what's up?"

"Listen, umm..." Rosepaw glanced at anything but Dawnpaw, wondering what she should say since she hadn't planned anything. "I'm sorry for storming off the other day," she meowed at last. "I thought I was in the mood to talk, but I guess I wasn't."

She said nothing about how upset she was that Dawnpaw was keeping some kind of secret from her. *If she doesn't want to talk about it, then I'm not going to ask.*

Dawnpaw blinked at her sister. "It's all right," she responded with mild surprise. "There's nothing to apologize for. Every cat has bad days every once in a while."

"Yeah, I suppose." Rosepaw gave her chest a couple of licks.

Seeming to sense how awkward Rosepaw was feeling, Dawnpaw asked, "Do you want to share some prey at sunhigh? Maybe we could go for a walk in the forest, if Grayleaf doesn't have my paws full of herbs for the whole day."

Happiness surged through Rosepaw. "Of course!" she purred, relieved that she and her sister hadn't drifted apart after all. "It feels like it's been *forever* since we've had time to ourselves."

Dawnpaw twined her tail with Rosepaw's and licked her sister's ear. "You don't have to worry about upsetting me, you know," she murmured gently. "I'm your littermate. If something's wrong, I'll always understand."

"I know," Rosepaw replied. "Thanks, Dawnpaw."

"Have you finished yet?" Grayleaf's gruff meow came from the front of the den.

"Yes, Grayleaf!" Dawnpaw separated from Rosepaw. "I'll come and tell you what we're low on in a moment."

"Hurry up, then!"

Dawnpaw rolled her eyes and muttered good-humoredly, "Grayleaf's no better than a badger sometimes. But she has her kind moments."

Rosepaw let out a small *mrrow* of laughter. "Good luck with the rest of your apprenticeship!" she joked.

"I'd better go before she uses my fur to line her nest. See you later!" Dawnpaw hurried to where her mentor was impatiently waiting for her.

Satisfied that her sister was still as close to her as ever, Rosepaw padded out of the medicine den.

Chapter 11

Glancing around, Rosepaw surveyed the camp from the entrance of the apprentices' den. Only Nightpaw was still asleep inside. The older apprentices had left camp earlier, to receive the most advanced battle training yet: combat above ground, among the lush branches of the trees. It was a skill that SunClan took pride in, and a skill that was respected and feared by the other Clans. Rosepaw couldn't wait until she was old enough to train in something as amazing as that.

She focused her attention on the rest of the camp. As the sun climbed higher into the pale, late greenleaf sky, more cats were emerging from their dens. Below the Cliffrock, Beestripe was surrounded by cats volunteering for border patrols and hunting patrols.

Nearby Pineclaw was reporting to Adderstar about the minor border skirmish he and Rosepaw had encountered earlier that morning. The Clan leader's eyes were narrowed in surprise, and occasionally he twitched his whiskers with amusement. *I don't blame him,* she purred to herself. *This morning was quite interesting for Pineclaw and I!*

Birchpelt was just leaving the nursery, his blue eyes shining with joy. Clearly he had just finished visiting Rainfoot and the kits. At the warrior den, Willowstripe and Shinefur were sharing tongues outside, while Deerdapple and Harefoot were coaxing a sleepy Robinfeather from his nest.

Ashwhisker and Fernstripe were outside the elders' den, soaking up the warmth that the rising sun brought. Brokenstem's amber eyes gleamed sleepily out of the den entrance. Rosepaw remembered the huge amount of moss her and Nightpaw had been forced to retrieve. *I'd bet that's why Ashwhisker isn't as cranky as usual,* she thought. *She can renew her nest the moment she wants to!*

Yawning, Rosepaw felt a comfortable contentment that the Clan

was at ease. She just hoped darkly that the prey-stealing rogues, or the incoming leaf-bare, didn't mess everything up.

Rising to her paws, she padded over to the nursery. She hadn't seen the kits yet, and decided that now would be a good time to visit them since Birchpelt had just left.

The warm, milky scent of the nursery brought back early memories of suckling at her mother Patchflower's belly, her soft fur always brushing her sister's. Rosepaw gazed in awe at Rainfoot, who had her gentle gaze fixed on the four soft bundles that nuzzled her belly.

"Oh, Rainfoot!" Rosepaw breathed. "They're beautiful. Congratulations," she added.

"The dark ginger one is Acornkit," Rainfoot meowed, her voice thick with pride and love. "She's my firstborn. The gray tabby like me is Crowkit. The two white-and-orange kits are Flashkit and Leafkit. They almost look identical, but Flashkit has one orange paw."

"Acornkit, Crowkit, Flashkit, and Leafkit." Rosepaw recited their names in an excited whisper. "Four little warriors in the making. Welcome to SunClan."

Something rustled behind her, and she turned to see Pineclaw nosing his way into the nursery.

"I haven't seen the kits yet," he explained. "And I won't miss welcoming them to SunClan!"

"Their names are Acornkit, Crowkit, Flashkit, and Leafkit." Rosepaw touched her tail-tip to each kit in turn, feeling proud that she already knew the names of all four.

"Those are good names," Pineclaw purred, his amber gaze fixed on the kits. "The apprentice den will be packed full in a few moons!"

"I can already tell that Acornkit will be a feisty one," Rainfoot meowed, her whiskers twitching with amusement as she watched her firstborn. "She hardly stops moving. Her littermates can't beat her to anything!"

I wonder if one of these kits will be my first apprentice? Rosepaw asked herself. *Hopefully I'll be a warrior by then.*

She glanced at her mentor, who was still watching the kits. The nursery was slightly crowded, and his pelt was brushing hers. Suddenly Rosepaw felt a little self-conscious, but there was no room for her to wiggle away. If Pineclaw noticed her shyness, he gave no sign of it.

What's wrong with me? I feel like I've got ants in my fur.

"I'm going to get something from the fresh-kill pile," she announced, hoping her mew didn't sound like a squeak to the older cats. Quickly she slipped out of the nursery, hoping a tasty mouse would help shake off the strange feeling in her belly.

As she settled outside the apprentice den, Rosepaw realized that Pineclaw had followed her out of the nursery. "Mind if I share with you?" he asked, sounding awkward. To her surprise, Rosepaw detected waves of embarrassment coming from her mentor. *What's gotten into him?*

"Sure," she mewed, making sure to sound cheerful. She didn't like seeing Pineclaw look so lost. "Go ahead."

"Thanks," Pineclaw meowed, sounding happy. "Just be sure to take some prey to the elders right after," he added more briskly, sounding more like his usual self.

"I will." Rosepaw tucked into the mouse, with Pineclaw following suit.

After a while she asked, "How is my training going? Have I been doing okay?"

"Oh, you've been doing fantastic." Pineclaw's eyes glowed with the pride he felt in his first apprentice. "Your hunting skills are very sharp, and you have quick reflexes in battle training. I think we'll be having your first assessment quite soon."

"Yes!" Rosepaw's pelt bristled with excitement. Her first assessment! *I'll show Pineclaw just how fantastic I can be! I wonder if it'll be a*

hunting test, or a mock battle, or both!

"You and Nightpaw will be having a partner fighting lesson today, at sunhigh," Pineclaw went on.

But that's when I'm meeting with Dawnpaw! Rosepaw figured she and her sister could just meet later in the day. She just hoped Grayleaf didn't keep her busy all over again.

Aloud she meowed, "Sounds fun! Will we meet you in the training hollow?"

Pineclaw nodded with a mouthful of their prey.
"I'll tell Nightpaw," Rosepaw added. "That is, if the lazy furball will wake up already!"

"Lazy furball? Say that to my face!" Nightpaw's playful hiss made Rosepaw jump. She twisted to see her friend's dark head popping out of the apprentices' den, his ice blue eyes shining good-humoredly.

"Oh good, you *are* up at last," Rosepaw teased, cuffing Nightpaw gently over his ear. "Did you hear what Pineclaw said?"

"Yup," Nightpaw answered. "Partner fighting sounds exciting! Rosepaw and I will be a force to be reckoned with."

"We sure will," Rosepaw agreed eagerly.

Pineclaw rose to his paws. "I've eaten enough," he mewed. "You and Nightpaw can have the rest. Remember to bring something to the elders, too!"

As he trotted away, Rosepaw felt the familiar flick of his tail-tip across her ear, and stifled a happy purr. She had to admit it to herself; she liked Pineclaw more than she liked most of her Clanmates. As she finished off the mouse with Nightpaw beside her, she thought again and again of the glow in Pineclaw's eyes whenever he looked at her, and the way her heart raced whenever their pelts brushed.

* * *

"Rear up on your hind legs, and balance back-to-back," Thrushtail instructed. "You can use each other to stay upright, and face enemies at any angle."

Rosepaw thrust herself up onto her hind legs, and felt Nightpaw's thick pelt against her back as she raised her forepaws. Thrushtail and Pineclaw split up, each taking one apprentice's side: Thrushtail on Rosepaw's, and Pineclaw on Nightpaw's.

Rosepaw swatted at her mock attacker's muzzle, pushing him away each time he tried to lunge for her exposed belly. Thrushtail was too slow to get close enough to inflict any real damage. Rosepaw felt Nightpaw's shoulders bump hers as he swiped at Pineclaw. *This is great!* she thought. *Nightpaw was right: we really are a force to be reckoned with!*

"Alright, that's enough of that move." Thrushtail backed away and waved his tail for Pineclaw to do the same. "That was well done, you two. Let's try another strategy."

"Rosepaw, you'll be the enemy," Pineclaw ordered. "Thrushtail and I will attack you, and Nightpaw can observe."

Rosepaw nodded and took on a defensive position, while Nightpaw backed up to the edge of the training clearing.

Side by side, the two warriors charged at her. Rosepaw braced herself to leap up high and dodge their attack. But to her surprise, at a flick of Thrushtail's tail, her attackers split up and flanked her. Before she could react, she felt the minor sting of sheathed paws pummeling her from every side, and collapsed beneath their weight.

As she hit the ground, Pineclaw and Thrushtail backed away and let her scramble to her paws again.

"That was amazing!" Rosepaw panted. "There was nothing I could do once you flanked me like that." She shook herself to clear the dust from her pelt.

"Can we try it now?" Nightpaw asked eagerly; Rosepaw guessed he'd had a good view of her being swatted down by two warriors at

once.

Pineclaw nodded. "Try it on Thrushtail," he advised. "He's the more experienced warrior, so if you can pull off that move on him, you can pull it off on anyone."

Thrushtail crouched as Rosepaw lined up beside Nightpaw. She let her friend take the lead, since he was the older apprentice. As they raced towards Thrushtail, Nightpaw flicked his tail as the split-up signal, and veered left. Rosepaw went right, cuffing Thrushtail's ear as she flew past, and began landing blow after blow on his patched flank.

Thrushtail fought back, swiping at Rosepaw while twisting to nip at Nightpaw. Some unspoken message passed between the apprentices, and at the same time they wrapped their forelegs around Thrushtail's and pulled them out from under him. Thrushtail fell forward into the dirt with a muffled grunt. Nightpaw didn't hesitate to leap on top of his mentor and start pummeling his back, while Rosepaw kept attacking his flank.

"I think Thrushtail's had enough, you two!" Pineclaw called from the edge of the clearing. His whiskers twitched with amusement as the apprentices let Thrushtail stand. The senior warrior's fur was matted and dusty, but they had been careful not to inflict any real wounds on him.

"That was well done too," Thrushtail puffed. "Nice move to unbalance me like that; I never saw it coming."

"How did we both know to do that at the same time?" Rosepaw gasped at Nightpaw, bursting with pride and surprise.

"Instinct," her friend responded. "Thrushtail told me that Clanmates can understand exactly how they need to help each other in battle."

"That's right, Nightpaw," Thrushtail agreed. "An important thing to remember: always trust your instincts in battle."

"That's enough training for one day, I think," Pineclaw mewed. You two can take a break and head back to camp. We're right behind

you."

"Thanks!" Rosepaw replied, dashing back towards the camp. She had told Dawnpaw that they would go for a walk in the forest as soon as her training session was over.

When she pushed through the fern tunnel, she saw her sister waiting beside the fresh-kill pile, shifting her paws impatiently.

"Dawnpaw!" she yowled. "I'm back!"

Dawnpaw's eyes lit up, and she bounded over to Rosepaw.

"Grayleaf knows we're going out," she mewed.

"So does Pineclaw," Rosepaw replied. "We're free to go, but we have to be back before it starts getting dark."

"As if we'd be in the forest for that long!" Dawnpaw joked. "Okay, let's go."

The sisters trotted out of camp, their pelts brushing. They didn't plan on going anywhere in particular—they just wanted to spend time with one another like they used to.

Out in the forest, a chilly breeze gently rustled the undergrowth and the tree leaves. Rosepaw tasted the air; the wind brought with it a sharp, dry tang that reminded her of chewing a fresh mint leaf. She realized that leaf-fall—and soon, leaf-bare too—were beginning to lay claim to the forest.

"The colder seasons are coming," she commented to Dawnpaw.

"Yep." Dawnpaw sounded determined. "We'll make sure Rainfoot's kits make it through. They'll be apprentices by newleaf."

"I met them this morning," Rosepaw purred. "They're so precious! What was it like, watching Rainfoot give birth?"

"Oh, it was incredible," Dawnpaw whispered. "I've never seen anything like it before. I still can't believe I helped bring four new warriors into the world," she added with a touch of pride.

"I hope I'll be a warrior by the time they're apprenticed," Rosepaw said. "Perhaps Adderstar would let me mentor one of them."

"I think you'll be a warrior by then," Dawnpaw responded. "And you'd be a great mentor!"

Rosepaw licked her sister's ear as they walked, grateful for her support.

"You should show me what you've learned so far," she meowed suddenly. "At least the basics. And I'll show you what I've learned!"

Dawnpaw curled her tail. "Sure!" she purred. "There are all sorts of herbs that do so many different things."

"Just don't try teaching me everything in one day, or my head might start hurting," Rosepaw joked.

Dawnpaw raised her nose into the air; Rosepaw guessed she was looking for any nearby herbs. Suddenly Dawnpaw darted away, and she quickly followed.

"These are dock leaves," Dawnpaw explained as Rosepaw halted beside her. She pointed her cream-colored tail at a clump of wrinkly green leaves, growing lushly in a patch of dark soil. "Remember when you got all scratched by a bramble bush?"

"That's right!" Rosepaw sniffed the leaves, taking in their familiar smell. "You used these to heal the scratches."

"I think there's a clump of marigold somewhere around here..." Dawnpaw muttered to herself. "Yes, it's this way."

Rosepaw followed her sister as she trotted through the undergrowth. They stopped at a patch of tiny golden flowers growing close to the ground.

"Here it is," Dawnpaw meowed. "Marigold is used to help slow the bleeding of a wound. It also helps prevent an infection from setting in by cleaning it up."

"Should we collect some of these herbs for Grayleaf later?" Rosepaw

asked.

Dawnpaw shook her head with amusement. "No, Grayleaf's had me out collecting herbs day after day," she scoffed. "We won't need to —"

Suddenly she trailed off, and her nose began twitching madly. "Rosepaw, do you smell that?" she asked, her eyes glittering with concern.

Rosepaw took a deep breath to catch the scent that was confusing Dawnpaw. Her heart lurched as the stench hit the back of her throat, all too familiar. It smelled of cats and of the Twolegplace, and was dangerously close by.

Rogues!

Chapter 12

"Get back to camp *now*," Rosepaw hissed to her sister. "Tell Adderstar that the rogues have intruded on SunClan territory again."

"The rogues?" Dawnpaw squeaked, her eyes wide with horror. "No! I'm not leaving you behind with them nearby!"

"You have to!" Rosepaw replied urgently. "I need to track them so we know where exactly they are. Just go, I'll be fine!"

She gave her sister a shove in the direction of the SunClan camp. Dawnpaw gazed at her a moment longer, her eyes full of fear and despair, and then plunged into the undergrowth.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Rosepaw checked which way the wind was blowing. *Good, I'm downwind. Hopefully that will make it easier to track the rogues without being detected.*

She stalked through the bracken, following the scent of the rogue cats. It wasn't long before she heard voices up ahead, and pricked her ears to hear what they were saying.

"I don't see why we even live in the neighborhood. There's so much more prey here!"

"Yeah, and there's also foxes and badgers that will eat you alive. The neighborhood is much safer."

Neighborhood? Maybe that's the rogues' word for the Twolegplace. Rosepaw crept closer to the sound of the voices, her heart beating so loud that she was almost certain the cats up ahead could hear it.

"Our group has more than a dozen cats!" the first voice exclaimed. "Foxes and badgers would be no match for us."

"Then what about those wild cats?" the second voice meowed. "Fauna, did you ever think that they might not be the friendliest

cats around here? Have you *smelled* how many of them live around here?"

"No, because I'm too hungry to focus on smelling anything I can't eat," the she-cat called Fauna muttered.

"Then open your nose for once!" the other she-cat snapped. "These wild cats will tear us to pieces if they don't welcome strangers."

"Okay, okay, keep your fur on, Poppy," Fauna hissed. "I'll keep watch for wild cats, and *you* can do the hunting."

The cats stopped talking, and only the occasional rustling of undergrowth signaled that they were still there.

That, and their disgusting smell, Rosepaw added to herself. Hot anger boiled in her belly that these cats had gotten away with hunting here for so long. She hoped that Dawnpaw was already at the camp, and that Adderstar was organizing a battle patrol. *Oh, I can't wait to teach these fox-hearts a lesson!*

A pigeon sounded an alarm call, which was abruptly cut off by a flurry of rustling.

"Nice catch," she heard Fauna mew.

"Thanks," Poppy replied. "It's quite plump. Do you want some?"

"Of course I do!" Fauna scoffed.

Rosepaw heard the pattering of pawsteps that signaled Fauna trotting over to Poppy and the pigeon. *It can't take that long to get to the camp,* she thought impatiently. *These cats are* much *farther into the forest than usual. Get a move on, Dawnpaw!*

Almost as if Dawnpaw had heard her, the bracken behind Rosepaw rustled quietly; she almost didn't hear it. SunClan's familiar scent wafted strongly over her, and she stifled a sigh of relief.

Five cats slithered out like shadows: Hazelfrost, Thumpstep, Minnowpaw, Quickstorm, and Cherryfur. Their eyes glinted with fury and thoughts of the fight that was approaching.

Rosepaw swept her tail in the direction of the rogues, who were still quietly hunting just a few tail-lengths away.

Quickstorm—Rosepaw guessed he was the leader of the patrol—nodded briskly at his daughter. He waved his tail slowly from side to side, silently ordering the SunClan cats to spread out. She crept to the left with Minnowpaw followed behind her.

"Isn't this exciting?" the silver apprentice whispered, so quietly Rosepaw could hardly hear her. "I'll rip the pelts off of those prey-stealers!"

For once, Rosepaw had to agree with her. She was looking forward to sinking her claws into one of these rogues!

The two apprentices crouched where they could still see Quickstorm's tail. Rosepaw forced herself to sit still while waiting for the signal to attack.

After a few moments that felt like a few seasons, her father slowly raised his tail. Every member of the patrol narrowed their eyes in anticipation. Rosepaw's heart pounded in her ears.

Quickstorm's tail-tip flicked once, and the patrol surged into the clearing.

The two rogue she-cats—a light brown tabby and a black-and-white cat—let out yowls of alarm. Before they could defend themselves, Hazelfrost and Cherryfur leaped on top of them and thrust them to the ground. Thumpstep, Minnowpaw, Quickstorm, and Rosepaw formed a semicircle around them in case the rogues tried to fight back.

"What were you saying about keeping watch, Fauna?" the black-and-white rogue hissed, her blue eyes blazing with anger.

"Now is *really* not the time, Poppy," Fauna muttered, glancing up at Cherryfur holding her down.

Quickstorm padded out of the semicircle and paced around the rogues. "You have been trespassing and hunting on our territory for too long now," he growled. His eyes were as icily calm as his voice,

and even Rosepaw shivered. *My father can be scary!*

"If this doesn't stop, you and your friends will get exactly what's coming to them," Quickstorm went on.

"Why are you telling us this?" Poppy muttered. "You're gonna kill us anyway. Save us your pointless speeches and get on with it!"

"Shut *up*!" Fauna rolled her eyes with irritation.

"Yes, you'd best be silent," Hazelfrost hissed. Her claws were barely unsheathed, the tips pressing into Poppy's neck fur. "Both of you."

"We'll deal with this *without* bloodshed, if we can." Cherryfur flashed a warning glance at her Clanmate. Hazelfrost acknowledged her words with a reluctant grunt.

"We're going to let you go, and you're going to go straight to your leader, if you have one," Quickstorm growled. "Make sure your companions get the message that they are not welcome here. And if we catch you on our territory again, we will not hesitate to fight. Understood?"

"Understood," Fauna replied bluntly, while Poppy just let out a furious snarl. *Clearly Fauna has more sense than her!* Rosepaw thought.

Quickstorm nodded at Cherryfur and Hazelfrost, who scrambled off of the rogues. Poppy and Fauna staggered to their paws, casting angry glares at the SunClan cats.

"We won't forget this in a hurry," Poppy meowed darkly. "Our leader won't give up as easily as you think she will. We *will* be back."

"C'mon, Poppy, let's just get out of here," Fauna murmured. "We're doing no good here."

Poppy tried to retrieve the pigeon she had caught, but Hazelfrost hissed viciously at her. "Not another pawsteps towards that!" she ordered. "Now go back to where you came from."

Poppy bared her teeth in the beginnings of a snarl, but suddenly stiffened. She raised her nose into the air, eyes alight with triumph. "Sorry, but you can't get rid of us that easy," she said. Fauna's nose was twitching too, and she was radiating relief.

Rosepaw and her Clanmates tasted the air. The rogue stench, even more powerful than before, rushed into her nose and mouth. She stifled a gag. *Oh no, there's more of them nearby,* she realized. *We might have no choice but to fight now.*

The bushes that lined up behind Poppy and Fauna began to tremble. Quickstorm bounded over to her and placed himself protectively in front of her and Minnowpaw. Cherryfur, Hazelfrost, and Thumpstep flanked him, letting out fierce growls.

The bushes parted to reveal a thin but muscular she-cat, black with white-tipped paws, tail, and muzzle. Her yellow eyes were calm but menacing, and Rosepaw had to stop herself from flinching away.

Behind the black she-cat, three more cats emerged. One was a small blue-gray tom; one was a dark tabby tom; and one was ginger with a distinctive marbled pattern in her fur. Every one of them was thin with hunger, but hard muscles rippled beneath their pelts, and their eyes gleamed with hostility.

Can we really face all of them? Rosepaw wondered, her heart racing with anxiety.

Fauna dipped her head to the black cat. "Zodiac," she greeted her. To Rosepaw's surprise, her eyes gazed at the black cat with respect. *This must be their leader!*

Zodiac nodded at Fauna, her gaze flicking over to the Clan cats. "What's going on here?" she asked. Her voice was deep, and she spoke with authority. Rosepaw could kind of understand why the rogues respected her.

Poppy growled. "These cats say we can't hunt in the forest," she explained, her lip curled in a sneer. "As if they really think we'll listen!"

"We'll *make* you listen if we have to." Hazelfrost flexed her claws. Cherryfur briefly touched her tail to her Clanmate's ear, as if reminding her that there was to be no fighting unless absolutely necessary.

"Fauna, Poppy, head back to the shelter," Zodiac ordered. "We'll take care of these cats now."

As Fauna and Poppy stalked away obediently, Zodiac meowed, "As far as I can tell, my cats can hunt wherever they please; they take orders from *me,* and no one else." Her eyes raked over the Clan cats. "What right do you have to this forest that we don't?"

"We have placed our scent markers on the Twolegplace border for moons beyond counting," Quickstorm growled. "And we have enforced that border with tooth and claw when we had to. The markers send a simple message: we do not welcome trespassing cats on our territory. This is a message you have failed to understand."

Rosepaw felt a surge of pride in her father. He was so brave to speak to these rogues that way! Surely the intruders would listen.

But Zodiac was not fazed. "Go ahead, then," she snarled. "Try and make us understand. I know we'll have no problem making *you* understand that your borders mean nothing to us. We will hunt wherever we see fit, and you won't stop us."

"So be it," Quickstorm hissed through gritted teeth. "SunClan, attack!"

All at once the battle patrol surged forward, right towards the advancing rogues. Rosepaw's heart pounded in her ears as she lunged forward, every fighting move she had learned at the tips of her claws.

She found herself facing the big tabby tom. His lip curled with cold amusement and he snarled, "You'll be too easy to crush!"

Feeling braver than she ever had before, Rosepaw hissed, "We'll see about that!"

Instantly she darted between his huge paws, sharply nipping one of

his legs as she went. The tom yowled painfully and swiped at her, his claws barely missing her ear as she scrambled out of reach.

While her enemy staggered, Rosepaw launched herself at his flank, scoring her claws through his thin fur. He snarled and sunk his teeth into her shoulder; Rosepaw yowled as fiery pain seared through her entire leg.

Suddenly silver fur flashed beside her, and she turned to see Minnowpaw raking her claws across the rogue tom's muzzle, freeing Rosepaw's shoulder from his grip. She quickly regained her footing and joined her Clanmate in scratching the rogue until he scrambled away with a screech of fury and pain.

"Come on," Minnowpaw hissed in Rosepaw's ear, "let's teach the rest of these fox-hearts a lesson."

Rosepaw nodded, stiffly ignoring the blood that was trickling from her shoulder. Side by side, the two apprentices pelted toward the blue-gray tom, who was grappling with Cherryfur.

I know what move we're going to use! Rosepaw thought, adrenaline coursing through her.

When there were only a couple tail-lengths between the apprentices and the rogue, Minnowpaw screeched, "Now!"

Rosepaw sprinted to the right and leaped on top of the rogue, sinking her claws into his shoulders. He snarled with surprise as his legs buckled, and he collapsed beneath Rosepaw's weight.

"Nice move!" Cherryfur began clawing relentlessly at the rogue's flank, while Minnowpaw battered him from the other side. It was only a few moments before the rogue was begging for mercy from his three attackers.

"Let him go," Cherryfur ordered. "He's not worth—"

She broke off with a yowl as the mottled ginger she-cat landed square on her back. Rosepaw realized with a jolt that, behind them, Thumpstep and Quickstorm were attacking Zodiac. The rogue leader wasn't doing much damage, but the Clan cats were beginning

to tire; she was nimbly dodging nearly every attack they made.

"Go help Cherryfur!" Minnowpaw hissed, looking down at the writhing blue-gray tom. "I'll deal with this cat."

Rosepaw nodded and scrambled off of him, charging at the she-cat that was attacking her Clanmate.

Cherryfur was writhing furiously on the ground, but the rogue had a firm grip on her, and she struggled helplessly. With a snarl of fury, Rosepaw used all her strength and hauled the rogue off of Cherryfur.

"Don't mess with SunClan warriors!" she hissed, raking her claws over the she-cat's nose and feeling blood spatter her chest fur.

The rogue screeched, and Rosepaw felt teeth meet in her ear, and claws scrape her flank at the same time. She yowled in pain as she collapsed, and felt herself smothered by her attacker's fur.

I can't breathe! StarClan, help me!

No matter how desperately she tried to free herself, Rosepaw only felt the claws dig deeper into her shoulders. The rogues' scent clogged her nostrils.

As the world began to grow dark and fuzzy, Rosepaw was vaguely aware of the claws vanishing, and the weight being lifted off of her. As she gasped for air, she saw glimpses of Cherryfur tussling once again with the ginger rogue, and Minnowpaw chasing the blue tom into the undergrowth.

The world spun as Rosepaw clutched at her consciousness again. *Did I almost die?* The thought plagued her mind as she lay helplessly. *I might still die.*

Suddenly the fighting stopped around her. She heard a voice she recognized as Zodiac's.

"You may have won this fight," she hissed. "But we *will* return. We will pick off your cats, one by one, until the forest belongs to us at last."

None of the rogue cats made a sound, confusing Rosepaw until she realized that they had all fled back toward the Twolegplace.

"This forest is ours," Cherryfur meowed calmly. "SunClan will not let you take it."

"So be it." Rosepaw fuzzily imagined Zodiac's golden eyes glinting with fury. "If it's a war you want, then it's a war we'll give you."

The grass rustled as Zodiac stalked away. Then silence.

Now that Rosepaw had nothing to focus on, she felt the world slipping away once more. As she struggled desperately to stay conscious, a distressed yowl reached her ears. It sounded distant and echoey, but she knew it belonged to Quickstorm as she fell limp, and the whole world went dark.

"Oh, StarClan, no...Rosepaw!"

Chapter 13

Dawnpaw paced worriedly outside the medicine den, her ears pricked to catch any sounds of the returning battle patrol. Her thoughts returned again and again to her sister, and she prayed to StarClan that Rosepaw would come home safely. *I don't know what I would do without her...*

Grayleaf's voice broke into her thoughts. "You should be in the den, making yourself useful," the old she-cat rasped. "Pacing won't make the patrol come back faster."

"I'm really worried about Rosepaw," Dawnpaw admitted. "What if she gets badly hurt? Or what if *anyone* in the patrol is injured?" she gasped. "Quickstorm! He's part of the—"

"Worrying your fur off isn't going to help," Grayleaf interrupted briskly. "If the patrol come back injured, then we have the herbs we need to heal them. That is, if you'll come inside and help me get them ready!"

Dawnpaw's mentor whisked around and back into the den. With a sigh, she followed behind her.

Grayleaf stood in front of a row of herbs. After a moment, Dawnpaw named them: "Marigold, comfrey, dock, horsetail, and poppy seed."

"That's right." Grayleaf glanced back at the herb store. "Do you think we're missing anything important? My memory isn't as good as it used to be."

"Perhaps we should have some feverfew or lavender as well," Dawnpaw suggested. "Just in case the injured cats develop fevers from their wounds."

"Good idea," Grayleaf mewed, blinking at her apprentice. "Anything else?"

"Umm..." Dawnpaw thought hard for anything else they could be missing. "Do we have any goldenrod?"

Grayleaf shook her head. "I used up the last of my stocks moons ago. Goldenrod only grows during leaf-fall."

"Oh, okay. Then I think we have everything we need." Dawnpaw sniffed the herbs laid out, and nodded.

"I'll go check the store," Grayleaf meowed. "I think I've got some feverfew around here somewhere..."

As her mentor padded away, Dawnpaw thought once again of the battle patrol. Two of the only three kin she had were on that patrol. She could not bring herself to imagine what it would be like for her —for the whole Clan—to lose them.

StarClan, please bring them home safe, she begged silently.

She decided to find something, anything, to do. Anything that would keep her busy, and keep her thoughts off the fight that was certainly happening out in the forest.

Maybe the elders need something. She trotted over to the elders' den at the edge of camp.
Inside, Fernstripe and Brokenstem were sharing tongues, while Ashwhisker snored in her nest.

Brokenstem glanced up as Dawnpaw entered. "Hello, Dawnpaw," he meowed.

"Hi, Brokenstem. Just checking in."

"Ah, we don't need anything for now." Brokenstem glanced at Ashwhisker's sleeping form, and his ears twitched. "Rosepaw and Nightpaw brought in plenty of prey earlier. Ashwhisker ate most of it, but we had our fill too."

Ashwhisker opened one yellow eye. "Someone say my name?" she muttered groggily.

"You can go back to napping, Ashwhisker," Fernstripe meowed.

Ashwhisker mumbled something incoherent and closed her eye.

Suddenly Dawnpaw thought of something. "I have a question," she began, settling into a crouch. "Did you ever have siblings that went into battle?"

Fernstripe blinked, her eyes clouding thoughtfully. "I had a brother named Quailflight," she rasped. "He was the fastest runner in all of SunClan."

"I remember Quailflight," Brokenstem murmured. His eyes were dark with sadness. "The whole Clan respected him. It was a dark time for us when he passed."

"Did he die in battle?" Dawnpaw asked, even though she knew she didn't want to know the answer.

Fernstripe shook her head. "No. He caught a bad case of greencough during a leaf-bare many seasons ago. Back then, Grayleaf had her full name, but was still an apprentice to our last medicine cat, Snowshine. There was nothing either of them could do." The elder's voice was choked with grief. Brokenstem licked her ear comfortingly.

"I'm very sorry," Dawnpaw meowed honestly. Silently she added, *I could never forgive myself if a cat died of greencough under my watch.*

"It's in the past, I suppose," Fernstripe murmured. Louder she asked, "Anyway, why did you want to know?"

"Rosepaw is going to be fighting the rogues that trespassed today," Dawnpaw explained, her belly aching with nervousness at the thought. "Did Quailflight ever go into battle?"

"Twice, yes," Fernstripe answered. "Both times it was with FireClan over some major border misunderstandings. I was with him for one of the fights."

"How did it feel when you weren't fighting beside him?" Dawnpaw prompted.

Fernstripe thought for a moment. "It's a bit hard to explain," she

mewed at last. "I was scared for him, yes, but...I wasn't really *worried*. I guess I just knew StarClan would make sure he came back alright."

"I wish I could be as certain as you were," Dawnpaw sighed.

"She's only an apprentice," Brokenstem said. "She has her entire life ahead of her. StarClan won't take her yet."

Dawnpaw wanted to snap, *You haven't met StarClan! How can you be so sure?* Then she realized the elder tom was only trying to make her feel better. *I'm a medicine cat,* she thought. *I'm not as easy to comfort as you might think.*

Out loud she murmured, "Thanks, Fernstripe, and Brokenstem. If you don't need anything, I'll just get back to Grayleaf."

Dawnpaw slipped out of the den, grateful for the fresh, crisp air outside. She was beginning to panic. Her warrior ancestors were calm, wise spirits; everything they did was for a reason. What reason could they possibly have for letting Rosepaw die and join their ranks? She was only an ordinary apprentice.

Dawnpaw allowed this to comfort her as she hurried back toward the medicine den. She almost didn't hear the yowl that sounded at the camp's entrance tunnel, full of distress.

"She can't be dead! She *mustn't* be! Oh, I never should have let her fight!"

Dawnpaw squeezed her eyes shut as she recognized the yowl as Quickstorm's. The world seemed to slow around her, the gasps of shock and horror muffled and distant. She knew what she would see when she opened her eyes, and wished that she didn't have to look.

With an effort she pulled her eyes open, and found herself staring at Rosepaw's limp form being carried by Thumpstep and Cherryfur. The apprentice's dark patched fur was even darker with her own blood, and her drooping tail left behind a thin scarlet trail.

No, no, no...please, no...

Dawnpaw stood rigid in the center of the clearing as Patchflower rushed out of the warriors' den. Her mother's green eyes widened in dismay, and she let out a choked cry of grief. She pelted over to Quickstorm's side and pressed her trembling body to his own. Together they watched as their daughter's body was carried over to Grayleaf's den. Still Dawnpaw did not move.

She can't be dead...StarClan, please don't take her.

She watched as Grayleaf burst from her den, her eyes narrowed to slits. She gently nosed Rosepaw's body. Dawnpaw closed her eyes again, and waited in agony for the words she knew were coming. *She's dead.*

"She's still breathing!"

All at once the world slammed back into focus.

She's still alive!

Trembling, Dawnpaw stumbled over to Grayleaf. Her mentor seemed to sense her shock, and gently meowed, "Go inside, find yourself some thyme or poppy seed. You've had quite the shock, and I can handle her by myself."

Gratefully, Dawnpaw entered the medicine den and found the poppy seeds Grayleaf had pulled from the herb store. She licked up two of them and staggered over to her nest, collapsing in the soft bed of moss and ferns.

She's really alive...thank StarClan!

Weak with relief—and already feeling the effects of the poppy seeds—Dawnpaw shut her eyes and let sleep overcome her.

* * *

Blinking open her eyes, Dawnpaw glanced around sleepily. To her surprise, she was not in her nest where she had fallen asleep. Instead, oak trees reached up into the sky, their lush green leaves almost completely blotting out the sky. Dawnpaw was lying in a small, barren clearing; it was the only part of the forest she did not

recognize. The rest of it she knew as SunClan territory.

Why am I out here? How *am I out here? When did this clearing get here?*

Dawnpaw scrambled to her paws and glanced around in confusion. The forest was eerily quiet. There was not a single wisp of wind to stir the foliage; the undergrowth concealed no prey, and the tree branches above no sound of birdsong.

Dawnpaw shivered. This forest looked familiar, but it did not feel familiar.

Suddenly a breeze picked up, faint but still noticeable. It sounded strange. Dawnpaw pricked her ears, and realized with a jolt that the wind wasn't disturbing the forest at all. It was like it didn't exist...but yet it did.

A voice breathed in her ear, its source invisible. She couldn't even tell if it was a tom or she-cat. "Come," it whispered.

The breeze changed direction, and suddenly Dawnpaw was upwind. Curious, she began to follow the wind in the direction it was blowing. *Maybe this is what that voice wants me to do.*

She realized soon that her paws were carrying her toward the Twolegplace. She remembered the earlier fear of discovering that the rogues had come much farther into SunClan territory than they had before.

Will I run into any of them? she thought worriedly. *They would rip my pelt off for sure.*

The wind hissed louder in her ears, and still not a single leaf rustled. It called Dawnpaw further forward, filled with whispers that were too quiet for her to make out.

"What are you telling me?" she called, aware that even her own voice sounded strange in the near silence.

There was no clear response. The wind kept blowing. Dawnpaw decided that she would keep following the path of the breeze until

she found what it was leading her to. She brushed past a luscious clump of ferns, suppressing a shiver as her pelt didn't move a single leaf on the plants.

As she walked, she began to smell an acrid tang in the air. *What is that?* she thought, her heart starting to beat faster. *Whatever it is, it must be close. I'm still upwind!*

Just as Dawnpaw finished her thoughts, a bright blast of light exploded in front of her. It was deafening—one of the only sounds that she'd heard since she awoke in the strange forest.

Dawnpaw felt herself thrown backwards, and she landed with a soft *thump* in the dirt. She could taste the sour scent all around her now, and she felt heat coming towards her in waves. Trembling with fear, she staggered to her paws and looked around.

She was surrounded by a wall of what looked like bright orange tongues, licking fiercely at whatever was close by. At its touch, the trees and undergrowth began to blacken into ash.
Dawnpaw gasped with horror, only to start coughing when the fumes went right down her throat.

Fire! It's f ire!

Dawnpaw whipped back and forth wildly, but the wall of fire was slowly closing in on her. There was no escape.

As her legs buckled in terror and defeat, she heard the sound of panic-stricken yowling, laced with pain. The faces of her own Clanmates were staring at her through the fire. Dawnpaw recognized Quickstorm, Patchflower, Rosepaw, Grayleaf, Rainfoot and her kits...

"Please help us, Dawnpaw!" they all moaned, their eyes dull with agony. "Help us! Help us!"

"What can I do?" Dawnpaw yowled helplessly. "I can't reach you!"

"Help us...help us..." Their voices began to grow weaker, and one by one her Clanmates' faces began to vanish, forever swallowed up by the relentless flames. The wall of heat moved ever closer,

threatening to take Dawnpaw with them.

"*Nooo!"* she screeched in horror. Images of the burnt, bloody bodies of all the cats she loved flitted uncontrollably through her mind, sending fresh panic coursing through her. She could hardly breathe now; the air was filled with black smoke, and the fire was tail-lengths away now.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Dawnpaw felt the terrifying heat sear through her fur and swallow her too. Her jaws stretched wide in a soundless wail, as the whole world went dark.

For a time that seemed like seasons upon seasons, Dawnpaw laid in a black void. Silence pressed in on her ears, and she could see absolutely nothing. Her pelt still ached with the pain of the fire slicing through her like a hot claw.

Suddenly light flashed, and the world stretched out in front of her again.

Coughing, Dawnpaw stumbled up and glanced at her surroundings. She froze with horror at the realization of where she was now.

She was in the SunClan camp, but not as she had always known it. The dens and camp wall, once lush with greens and browns, were now black ash and were crumbling away. The fresh-kill pile was nonexistent. The Cliffrock was coated and smudged with ash.

The camp was in ruins. But that was not what truly shocked Dawnpaw.

Littered across the clearing were the bodies of all of her Clanmates. As Dawnpaw's eyes flitted to each scorched corpse, their names flashed in her mind, and their voices wailed desperately in her ears.

"Why didn't you save us, Dawnpaw?"

"There was nothing I could do!" Dawnpaw wailed into the dark sky. "This is all my fault! I'm so sorry!"

She noticed a little puddle of water nearby. It was the only thing that didn't seem affected by the fire. Dawnpaw suddenly realized

how thirsty she was; her mouth was drier than a moorland during a drought, and every time she licked her lips she tasted ash.

Dawnpaw staggered over to the water and began to lap it up, her eyes closed with thankfulness. She had never tasted anything so delicious.

But when Dawnpaw opened her eyes again, the first thing she saw was her reflection.

Half of her face was completely ravaged, black and bloody. She thought she could see exposed bone beneath the skin, and the very thought of that made her gag. She stumbled backwards with a horrified cry.

The sickening vision of her face stuck in her mind as darkness began to close in on her, whirling around her just as the fire had. A familiar voice—the voice that had coaxed her forward before—whispered in her ear once again.

"A terrible tragedy approaches," the voice murmured ominously. "Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun."

Chapter 14

Dawnpaw padded quietly alongside Grayleaf through MoonClan territory, her eyes fixed on her paws. Tonight was the medicine cats' half-moon meeting, and the night Dawnpaw would be officially welcomed into the ranks of the medicine cats by StarClan.

"Are you sure you want to come tonight?" Grayleaf had asked her earlier that day. The gray she-cat knew about Dawnpaw's horrifying dream, and also understood how worried she was about her sister's injuries. "You can stay here and watch over Rosepaw."

"No," Dawnpaw had answered firmly, although the memory of her dream was still fresh in her mind. "I *have* to come tonight. StarClan is going to accept me as a medicine cat. And you told me yourself that Rosepaw's injuries aren't fatal; she only passed out from shock and exhaustion."

"Very well," Grayleaf had murmured.

Dawnpaw knew that her mentor believed she was too young to have received such a brutal message from StarClan. And as they trekked through MoonClan territory on their way to the Starfalls—the sacred place where medicine cats shared tongues with their ancestors—she wondered fearfully what the message had meant.

Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun.

Dawnpaw wondered if it was Violetsky who had brought her the message. The starry cat had visited her before, and had even given her a warning regarding Rainfoot's kits. A warning that Dawnpaw had still not shared with anyone.

She recalled that the voice from her dream had been unrecognizable; it didn't even register as a tom or she-cat. *I hope I meet Violetsky at the Starfalls,* she thought. *Then I can ask her if she sent me the dream too.*

"Leafstripe! It's good to see you." Grayleaf's call broke into Dawnpaw's thoughts. She looked up to see the MoonClan medicine cat bounding towards them.

"Hello, Grayleaf!" Leafstripe mewed. She turned her warm gaze to Dawnpaw. "You must be excited for tonight. StarClan will be pleased to meet you!"

Dawnpaw forced herself to sound cheerful. "Yes, I'm very excited. I've been waiting for this for a long time."

Grayleaf murmured something inaudible in Leafstripe's ear. The tabby she-cat's eyes widened sympathetically, and she nodded with a quick glance at Dawnpaw.

Grayleaf told her that I've had a nightmare, she guessed.

Louder Grayleaf meowed, "Let's get a move on. Palefeather and Pineshadow will find us along the way."

As the three cats padded along, Leafstripe prompted, "Has Rainfoot given birth to her kits yet?"

"Yes, she has two tom-kits and two she-kits," Grayleaf reported. "They're all healthy."

"Four kits!" Leafstripe purred. "Sounds like quite the pawful, especially with Rainfoot being the only queen in the nursery."

"I expect Shinefur and Patchflower will help her on occasion," Grayleaf responded. "And the elders can keep them entertained with their endless stories!"

"Mallowkit, Icekit, and Yellowkit—the three kits that I told you about at the last Gathering—can hardly sit still. The sooner they're six moons old, the better!"

As the two medicine cats chatted, Dawnpaw's thoughts wandered back to her dream. *Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun.*

Dawnpaw had not the slightest idea what the message meant, and neither had Grayleaf when she had told her about the dream.

Perhaps the "sun" was SunClan. But what did a "bloodstained flower" have to do with that? What *was* the bloodstained flower? And the most foreboding question: what was the terrible tragedy that was coming? *Maybe it has something to do with Rainfoot's kits, and Violetsky's message?*

All these theories made Dawnpaw all the more eager to get to the Starfalls. Only StarClan held the answers to her questions.

* * *

"We're getting close," Palefeather meowed, his tail-tip flicking with anticipation.

Dawnpaw took a deep, shaky breath, excited but terrified at the same time. She wondered if the other medicine cats could sense her fear.

Medicine cats shouldn't be afraid of speaking with StarClan, she scolded herself. *Our ancestors would never do anything to harm us.*

Up ahead, the moorland outside of Clan territory stretched in front of them, with dark willow trees looming up several fox-lengths away. Their leaves glowed faintly in the moonlight, reminding Dawnpaw of the Moontree. Though these were not nearly as spectacular.

She pricked her ears as the sound of running water reached her. A thrill suddenly coursed through her, and she felt more like the eager apprentice she had been before her dream. *I can't believe I'm actually about to see the the Starfalls!*

She bounded forward, breaking away from the rest of the group, and brushed past the trees and thick undergrowth that grew lush from the nearby water. She was aware of the older cats watching her with amusement as she rushed to see the Starfalls.

Suddenly the ground sloped steeply downward, and Dawnpaw scrabbled backwards to avoid tumbling down the hill. Once she found her footing, she glanced up. Her breath caught in her throat at what she saw.

At the foot of the hill was a small hollow—the ground rose up again on the other three sides, thick with luscious green grass. Countless little waterfalls flowed from tiny streams above, splashing quietly into a round pool in the center of the hollow. The gently rippling water reflected the glittering warriors of Silverpelt above, and the half-moon's broken shape glowed like a white claw in the water.

"I-It's so beautiful!" Dawnpaw whispered. Her paws felt like roots buried deep in the ground as she stared at the Starfalls.

Leafstripe padded up to stand beside her. "Can you hear them?" she murmured, almost too quietly for Dawnpaw to hear.

"Hear who?" Dawnpaw asked, bewildered.

"StarClan. They whisper to us even now, if we choose to listen."

Dawnpaw blinked, pricking her ears to listen intently. She suppressed a gasp when she heard quiet voices, warm and gentle, all around her. They were to quiet for her to hear, but she knew their words could make decisions that defined destinies.

"I thought it was just the wind," she breathed to Leafstripe.

"No. It is StarClan, calling to us. They are calling to *you,* Dawnpaw." Leafstripe's glimmering eyes turned on her. "They are eager to meet you."

Dawnpaw met the wise she-cat's gaze, and felt a warm sense of peace blooming inside her. *No matter what my dream means, I know that StarClan will not desert us.*

"Let's go," Leafstripe called to the rest of the medicine cats. "Shouldn't keep StarClan waiting for us."

Dawnpaw waited for Grayleaf, and together they descended down the hill at the back of the group. Leafstripe, Pineshadow, and Palefeather lined up in a half-circle at the edge of the pool. Grayleaf crouched beside them, and Dawnpaw took her place at the edge of the line.

Grayleaf lifted her clear blue eyes to the stars above. "Dawnpaw, is

it your wish to enter the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?" she meowed.

Dawnpaw forced her voice to be steady and calm. "It is."

"Then come forward." Her mentor beckoned her warmly with her tail. Dawnpaw crept up to the very brink of the pool.

"Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice. She has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant her your wisdom and insight, so that she may understand your ways and heal her Clan in accordance with your will."

Leaning over to Dawnpaw, she added, "Drink from the pool and lay down."

As Grayleaf spoke, the other medicine cats bent down to lap up a few drops of water from the pool. Dawnpaw copied them along with her mentor.

Settling down with her eyes closed, Dawnpaw prayed, *Please tell me about my dream. I have to know what I can do to help my Clan face the danger that approaches.*

She felt herself pulled into StarClan's dream-sleep, and succumbed to the inviting warmth of it. Blinking open her eyes, she realized she was still lying at the edge of the Starfalls. The sleeping shapes of Leafstripe, Palefeather, Pineshadow, and Grayleaf were exactly where they had been before.

What? I...I thought I was supposed to be in StarClan's hunting grounds. Why am I still here?

"Greetings, Dawnpaw."

A sweet purr sounded behind her, and she whipped around with surprise. There was a small, dark cream she-cat sitting behind her. Starlight made her fur shimmer, and Dawnpaw realized she must be a warrior of StarClan. She didn't recognize the color of her coat, but she knew there was no forgetting the intensity in the cat's deep, dark blue eyes.

"Violetsky!"

The beautiful she-cat padded up to touch noses with Dawnpaw. "I have been waiting for this meeting for many moons. Your paws were turned on the path of a medicine cat ever since you were born."

"Really?" Dawnpaw gasped, in awe of how much Violetsky knew.

"Yes," Violetsky purred. "You will be a fine addition to the ranks of those who healed SunClan before you."

"I am honored to be counted among them," Dawnpaw mewed.

"I was one of them, you know." Violetsky leaned closer. "I served as the medicine cat for SunClan. Do you remember Snowshine?" she prompted.

"Yes, I remember!" Dawnpaw exclaimed. "Fernstripe, one of our elders, mentioned that she was Grayleaf's mentor."

"That's right," Violetsky meowed. "I mentored the cat who mentored Snowshine."

"Wow!" Dawnpaw dipped her head in respect. *She set in motion a skilled line of medicine cats to come after her.* "What was your apprentice's name?"

"Frecklefur. He had gray fur with white spots all over. He was so calm and quiet. He had his own way of showing how eager he was to learn." Violetsky's eyes glowed fondly, and Dawnpaw found it hard to believe that her starry friend saw her apprentice every day in StarClan. *She talks about him like she hasn't seen him in moons. But maybe there are no injuries in StarClan, and she just misses how they used to heal cats together?*

A thorn of grief pierced Dawnpaw's heart as she thought of Rosepaw, lying asleep in her nest in the medicine den, dried blood staining her soft tortoiseshell fur. If only there were no injuries in the living world either; then her sister wouldn't be so terribly wounded.

"Dawnpaw?" Violetsky's gentle mew broke into her thoughts. "You seem troubled."

"Is Rosepaw going to be okay?" Dawnpaw asked with a tremor in her voice. "You must have seen her wounds. She isn't going to die, right? She *can't*."

Violetsky shook her head. "Your sister has a long life ahead of her," she murmured. "This was her first battle, but it will not be her last."

"Oh, good!" Dawnpaw felt weak with relief. She couldn't wait to tell Grayleaf that Rosepaw was going to survive!

"There is...something else, though." Violetsky's gaze met her, and Dawnpaw found it impossible to look away. "Rosepaw is not the only thing on your mind, is she?"

"Of course. The dream!" Dawnpaw blinked at Violetsky. "Can you tell me anything else?" she pleaded. "I have to know how to protect my Clan from whatever's coming!"

Violetsky stared at her blankly. She suddenly seemed as clueless as Dawnpaw.

"I do not know what you speak of," she meowed, tilting her head to one side.

Dawnpaw stared at the StarClan cat in shock. "But I thought you sent the dream to me," she protested in confusion.

"Another ancestor of yours must have foreseen the danger, and warned you," Violetsky replied. "I know nothing of it right now."

"Oh..." Dawnpaw felt disappointed, and frustrated. She had planned on finding out more about what dangers lay in the future for SunClan. But now Violetsky, the only StarClan cat she knew, was as confused as she was.

"But," Violetsky went on, "what I do know is that StarClan will not abandon your Clan in its time of need. Remember that, no matter what dangers you face, we are with you."

Her dark blue eyes lifted to stare at something behind Dawnpaw.

Dawnpaw turned around, and gasped. At the other edge of the hollow, dozens upon dozens of starry cats lined up beside the Starfalls. They were all watching Dawnpaw, and suddenly she felt their eyes burning intently into her pelt.

The crowd of StarClan cats parted to reveal one huge cat. Dawnpaw was startled by how faint his outline was; she realized he must be a very old spirit. Tiny speckles of starlight glimmered in his long golden fur—unlike the rest of the cats, whose pelts were blazing with stars—and his intense, sky blue eyes locked with Dawnpaw's.

"I am Sunstar." The cat's raspy meow was faint, like the whispering of wind through trees. Dawnpaw strained her ears to hear every word he spoke. "I was the very first of your Clan's leaders. I sent you the vision of danger to come."

Dawnpaw's throat felt dry with utter shock. All she could do was dip her head in the highest gesture of respect, for the one cat who had brought forth the destiny of every single SunClan cat that would live after him. *I can't believe I'm talking to him. Why me?*

Managing to find her voice, she whispered, "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

Sunstar shook his broad head. "It is not my place," he rumbled. "I have warned you, and sometimes that is all StarClan can do."

"Can you at least tell me *when* the disaster will come?" Dawnpaw asked desperately. "And how could a 'bloodstained flower' possibly save us?"

"All will become clear to you." Sunstar's eyes gazed calmly at her, and his voice was laced with the same fondness that any warrior would feel towards a Clanmate. "Even when all seems lost, one thing will remain certain: your faith in us, and our faith in you."

"Have faith, Dawnpaw." The entire clearing echoed with the sounds of StarClan spirits. Dawnpaw heard Violetsky's voice among them, and realized she was now sitting among the other cats.

"We will always be with you," Sunstar whispered, touching his nose to Dawnpaw's ear. She realized he was now trembling, as if the weight of the whole world was upon his shoulders. *What's wrong with him?*

"We are with you, Dawnpaw," echoed the other spirits.

Dawnpaw closed her eyes and let the comforting voices drift over her, blanketing her in peace. Suddenly she was aware of Sunstar's nose disappearing, and her eyes opened. The first-ever leader of SunClan was now a cat made of mist; a slight breeze blew from the left, and he began to drift away.

Heart pounding, Dawnpaw gasped, "What's happening to him?" No cat responded. An air of grief and respect hung over the StarClan cats.

Then Sunstar was gone, with not even a trace of his scent left behind.

Did I just watch SunClan's first leader fade away?

She felt numb with the realization. *The last thing he ever did was bring* me *a message.*

Then the voices started up again. "Have faith, Dawnpaw. We are with you."

Despite the scene that had just unfolded before her, Dawnpaw felt the confidence of StarClan seeping into her, coursing through her veins. And deep down inside, though the prophecy felt like a heavy stone in her heart, she knew that everything would be okay in the end. StarClan would guide her Clan through whatever darkness they faced.

Chapter 15

The first thing Rosepaw felt when she awoke was another warm body stirring beside her. She lifted her head sleepily to investigate, and found herself staring into the amber eyes of Pineclaw.

"Rosepaw, you're awake!" he gasped. "Thank StarClan. I was so worried!" He rubbed his muzzle over Rosepaw's face, purring, and Rosepaw found herself purring too.

"Where are Dawnpaw and Grayleaf?" she asked, looking around. The two medicine cats were nowhere to be seen.

"They went to the half-moon meeting," Pineclaw explained. "Grayleaf said your injuries weren't fatal anymore, and it was okay to leave you here for a while." His eyes darkened. "I stayed here, just in case."

"How long have I been asleep?" Rosepaw asked with a frown. She could see sunlight streaming through tiny holes in the den wall.

"The rest of the patrol brought you in as the sun was going down. You slept all through the night after Grayleaf treated you. She and Dawnpaw should be back from the meeting soon."

"Is everyone else okay?"

"You were the only one who had to stay in the medicine den."

Rosepaw twisted around to examine herself. Her fur was well groomed—*Pineclaw probably groomed me in my sleep,* she thought warmly—but she could see scars parting her fur in many places. She suppressed a gasp when she saw the nasty bite on her shoulder.

"That was where most of the blood came from," Pineclaw muttered. "Seriously, Rosepaw, I thought you were dead when they carried you into camp. I was so scared."

Rosepaw was touched by how much her mentor cared. She licked

each of his ears comfortingly. "I'm here now," she mewed. "That's all that matters."

Pineclaw leaned closer to her, close enough for her to see the soft red fur that rounded his face. His sweet scent wreathed around her. *I wish we could stay like this forever,* she thought.

"Do you think you could walk?" Pineclaw asked gently. "The rest of the Clan is eager to see if you're okay."

"Sure, I could stand," Rosepaw meowed. She staggered to her paws, with Pineclaw rising beside her. But her injured shoulder ached when she tried to put weight on her leg, and she almost flopped back into her nest.

Pineclaw rushed to her side and pushed her back up with his flank. "Lean on me," he instructed.

Together apprentice and mentor emerged from the medicine den. Rosepaw narrowed her eyes against the pale sunlight, and fluffed out her fur against the chilly wind. Leaf-fall was on its way to the forest.

The clearing was mostly deserted—she guessed most of the warriors were on the morning patrols—but a few cats were still left. Shadowpaw glanced up near the apprentice den, his eyes widening in surprise and delight, and muttered something in Minnowpaw's ear. The silver she-cat looked up as well, and together they hurried toward Pineclaw and Rosepaw.

"Hi, Rosepaw!" Minnowpaw chirped. "How are you feeling?"

"Great," Rosepaw mewed. She examined Minnowpaw. "Wow, you've hardly got a scratch on you!"

"Lucky, I guess," Minnowpaw purred proudly. "Look, Shadowpaw, she tore her ear! Nice battle scar right there."

Shadowpaw looked less enthusiastic. "Yeah, that shows how hard you fought."

Rosepaw couldn't help feeling a *little* smug. *Wait till I show this off to*

Nightpaw! Although I'd bet that Quickstorm and Patchflower would be less amused. Dawnpaw, too.

"Where is Nightpaw?" she asked suddenly.

"Out training with Thrushtail," Minnowpaw said. "But *we're* not training today," she added with a glance at Shadowpaw. "And you'll never guess why!"

"Why, then?" Rosepaw asked.

"We're going to be warriors!" Minnowpaw leaped into the air, catching a leaf that was fluttering past and shredding it upon the ground excitedly.

"Congratulations!" Pineclaw purred. "When is the ceremony?"

"At sunhigh," Shadowpaw meowed. "I can't believe we're finally getting our warrior names!" His eyes gleamed with pride. Rosepaw realized she hardly ever saw Shadowpaw get too excited over anything, but not now.

"Come on, let's go practice our parts in the ceremony." Minnowpaw flicked her striped tail and trotted away, with her brother at her heels.

"Will my ceremony be delayed because of how bad I got hurt?" Rosepaw asked Pineclaw anxiously.

Pineclaw shook his head. "Your ceremony won't be for a while yet anyways," he meowed. "Your wounds will have healed fine by then. Come on, let's get something to eat from the prey pile."

"Shouldn't I feed the elders first?" Rosepaw queried.

"Nightpaw already did, before he went out for training. He changed out their nests too." Pineclaw's whiskers twitched with amusement. "All the moss you two collected is finally running out!"

He led Rosepaw over to the well-stocked pile. She chose a fat squirrel for them to share, and they settled down to eat.

"Will I at least be able to keep training?" she asked. "I feel fine; I just have a limp, that's all. Really."

"As long as Grayleaf approves, you can keep training," Pineclaw mewed. "But we'll have to take it easy for a while. I don't want you to reopen any of your wounds."

Rosepaw nodded and bit into the juicy squirrel. Light training was better than no training at all!

"Cherryfur tells me you fought as hard as any warrior against the rogues," her mentor went on. "You helped her fight off a rogue that had her pinned down. I'm very proud of you."

Rosepaw ducked her head shyly, glad that her mouthful of prey was the perfect excuse not to reply. *I really didn't help much,* she thought. *Cherryfur easily could have thrown that rogue off without my help, I'm sure.*

Pineclaw took a bite of the squirrel as well. The scents of the prey mixed with his own, and Rosepaw felt her thoughts drift lazily.

Did Pineclaw feel the same way she did? She had admitted to herself that she had developed a crush on her young mentor, but she wasn't certain that he felt the same. All his worrying about her injuries could have just been a mentor worrying about his apprentice. But Rosepaw hoped to StarClan that he felt something more.

Perhaps Dawnpaw would know? Rosepaw's sister had suspected her feelings about Pineclaw right from the beginning. If that had turned out to be true, then maybe Dawnpaw could also tell if Pineclaw liked her as more than a friend? She *did* have a knack for reading most cats quite easily.

Yeesh, I must be head over tail for him if I'm trying this hard!

She took another bite of prey absently. Only the rustling of the fern tunnel dragged her mind back to the present.

Grayleaf emerged from the tunnel, with Dawnpaw at her heels. Rosepaw noticed their eyes were shining with satisfaction. *The*

meeting must have gone well.

"I'm going to talk to Dawnpaw," she meowed to Pineclaw. "Save some of that squirrel for me, please!"

She limped slowly over to her sister. Dawnpaw's amber eyes widened in surprise. "Rosepaw!" she exclaimed. "You're awake! You should be resting in the medicine den," she added with the typical sternness of a medicine cat.

Rosepaw purred. "I'm taking it easy," she promised. "The wounds barely hurt anymore, really!"

"She's a strong young cat," Grayleaf added to her apprentice. "She'll be just fine in no time. And stretching her legs will do her good."

"If you say so, Grayleaf," Dawnpaw mewed as her mentor padded away. She turned to Rosepaw. "Before you ask me anything, remember that I'm not allowed to tell you what happened during the meeting."

Rosepaw huffed. "I don't need the tiny details," she insisted. "Come on; at least tell me what you *saw*."

"Oh, alright, if it makes you stop asking me about it!" Dawnpaw glanced around to make sure no other cats were within earshot, then whispered, "I saw StarClan cats. There were so many, all misty and sparkly."

"That's amazing!" Rosepaw gasped, only just remembering to keep her voice down. "I wish I could see StarClan cats too. Do you know the names of any of them?"

Dawnpaw hesitated. "A few, yes," she meowed. "But I won't say any more. You said you didn't need any real details, and I can't give them to you anyway!"

"Fiiiiine." Rosepaw batted her sister's cheek gently. "Did you hear that Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw are having their warrior ceremony at sunhigh?"

"Nope, I had no idea," Dawnpaw replied with a glance up at the sky.

"Sunhigh isn't too far off. I've never seen a warrior ceremony."

"Yeah, me neither," Rosepaw agreed. "The youngest warriors are Robinfeather, Birchpelt, Deerdapple, and Pineclaw, but they were all made warriors just after we were born. We were too young to watch."

"This will be a good time to learn what you're supposed to to during the ceremony," Dawnpaw said.

Rosepaw nodded. "I wonder if Nightpaw and I will be made warriors at the same time. I'd hate to be all alone during the silent vigil!"

"I hope you do become warriors together, then," Dawnpaw laughed. Suddenly her eyes narrowed mischievously. "And when you're a warrior, you and Pineclaw can sleep in the same den."

Rosepaw glanced at the ground. The idea did sound appealing—just not when her sister was teasing her about it!

"All right, you win. I guess I *kind of* like him," she muttered. "But I don't even know if he likes me back."

"I'm pretty sure he does," Dawnpaw whispered. "Have you even seen the way he looks at you all the time? He's impressed by everything you do! And you should've seen how worried he was when the battle patrol carried you into camp."

"He's my mentor," Rosepaw pointed out. "Of course he'd be worried about me. That doesn't mean he likes me like *that*."

"It's more than that," Dawnpaw insisted eagerly. "Grayleaf sent me to my nest while she worked on your wounds. When I woke up, Pineclaw was staring at you with the gentlest expression! He started grooming you in your sleep while Grayleaf and I got ready to leave for the meeting."

So he did smooth my fur! Rosepaw thought. *I knew it.*

"If Pineclaw doesn't have a crush on you, then I'm a mouse," Dawnpaw finished, pausing for breath.

Rosepaw purred. "Well, thanks for your optimism. I suppose I'll find out soon enough."

The fern tunnel rustled madly as two patrols returned. The border patrol—Hazelfrost, Quickstorm, Willowstripe, and Ebonypelt—and the hunting patrol—Harefoot, Patchflower, and Forestfire. The border patrol padded up to Adderstar, who had been talking quietly with Beestripe beneath the Cliffrock. Meanwhile, the hunters deposited their catch at the fresh-kill pile.

Patchflower and Quickstorm bounded over to their daughters and circled Rosepaw happily.
"Thank StarClan you're okay!" Patchflower breathed.

"You looked horrible when they brought you back." Quickstorm shuddered.

"I'm feeling fine now," Rosepaw assured them. "Just a bit of ache in my shoulder."

Dawnpaw sniffed at the bite. "It'll probably heal completely in a few days. You'll have to come in daily for a poultice until Grayleaf says it's healed."

Rosepaw nodded. "Sounds fine to me. As long as my training doesn't get delayed!"

As she finished speaking, Adderstar's yowl sounded from the Cliffrock. "Let all cats over six moons old gather beneath the Cliffrock!"

"It's time!" Rosepaw whispered. "Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw are going to be warriors."

All around her, cats emerged from their dens. Thrushtail and Nightpaw raced into camp at Adderstar's summons. Shadowpaw and Minnowpaw were ducking to avoid Shinefur, who was stubbornly trying to smooth their already sleek fur.

Rosepaw sought out Pineclaw and bounded over to sit beside him towards the back of the crowd, her fur faintly brushing his. She looked up at Adderstar, who was watching Minnowpaw and

Shadowpaw as they padded over to the base of the Cliffrock.

As the last of the cats took their seats, he meowed, "Today is a proud day for SunClan. Two apprentices are to become warriors." He glanced down at Thumpstep and Cherryfur, who sat side by side. "Do you agree that your apprentices are ready to be warriors?"

"They are more than ready," Cherryfur meowed.

"Yes, they have trained hard and well," Thumpstep added.

"Then let the ceremony begin." Adderstar leaped down and padded into the shade of the Cliffrock's shadow. "Minnowpaw, Shadowpaw, come forward."

The siblings came to stand beside the SunClan leader, their eyes shining and their fur bristling with excitement.

"I, Adderstar, leader of SunClan," Adderstar began, "call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." His sharp eyes flicked to the apprentices. "Shadowpaw, Minnowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," both cats responded in unison. Rosepaw observed that Shadowpaw's voice quivered, while Minnowpaw's was strong and steady.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names," Adderstar meowed. "Minnowpaw, from this moment you will be known as Minnowtail. StarClan honors your bravery and enthusiasm, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SunClan."

The newly named Minnowtail stepped forward. Adderstar touched his muzzle to her forehead, and she licked his shoulder in return. She stepped back to let her brother come forward.

"Shadowpaw," Adderstar continued, "from this moment you will be known as Shadowpool. StarClan honors your calmness and thoughtfulness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SunClan."

The respectful gesture was repeated, and then Minnowtail and Shadowpool stood together, facing the rest of the Clan. The cheers erupted.

"Minnowtail! Shadowpool! Minnowtail! Shadowpool!"

Rosepaw cheered as well, proud of her denmates. *They're going to make amazing warriors.*

Then she noticed something. Minnowtail was glancing up at the Cliffrock occasionally, then over at Adderstar. Rosepaw narrowed her eyes. Was that hunger in the pretty she-cat's eyes? Ambition? Desire?

Suspicion stabbed at Rosepaw. Minnowtail probably saw becoming a warrior as coming one step closer to being leader of SunClan. *I'd think any warrior would dream of leading their Clan someday*, she thought. *But Minnowtail...*

The memory of their discussion about Gatherings flitted through Rosepaw's mind. *Real warriors* never *feel fear,* Minnowpaw had muttered as Cherryfur stalked away. Back then, she had been bold and defiant; who could say whether she had changed? Rosepaw felt certain she hadn't. Something about the idea of her as SunClan's leader was just...*unsettling*.

If becoming leader was really what Minnowtail desired, how far would the ambitious warrior go to get what she wanted?

Chapter 16

Rosepaw wriggled her haunches eagerly, hardly able to sit still. The mouse in front of her was the fattest she had ever seen—and she had been born in greenleaf! *This prey is as good as mine,* she thought triumphantly. *Imagine what the Clan would say when I brought* this *into camp!*

With a hiss she sprang forward, quick as lightning, her claws flashing in the faint light that broke through the thick canopy over her head. Her claws sunk satisfyingly into the mouse's plump body, and she glanced down to dispatch it with a bite to its neck.

She froze.

The mouse had vanished. Instead, beneath her grip was a small black-and-white cat. His round amber eyes stared up at her, glazed with fear and pain.

Suddenly Rosepaw felt uncontrollable rage pulsing through her, burning through her claws and making her hackles rise. *Why do I feel this way?* she asked herself. *And who is this cat? Why am I attacking him?*

"Please don't," the cat whispered hoarsely. Rosepaw noticed he had nasty wounds dotting his flanks, and his struggles were feeble. *Did* I *do this?* she wondered in shock.

The thoughts of her real consciousness were drifting away, replaced by angry thoughts twisted by grief. Her grip on the black-and-white tom instinctively tightened, and she felt her teeth bared to close over his throat. She didn't know why, but she wanted this cat dead.

With a snarl, she lunged for his neck. Her vision clouded over in a haze of red, and she was aware of the cat's warm blood washing over her tongue. His agonized shriek—abruptly cut off—rang in her ears.

Part of Rosepaw was horrified at what she had done. *This is against the warrior code!* But another part of her felt the cold satisfaction of sweet, sweet revenge.

Revenge.

"Rosepaw, wake up!"

Her eyes snapped open as she woke with a start. She glanced around wildly for a heartbeat. She was back in her nest in the apprentices' den. Nightpaw's icy blue eyes glowed in the darkness, fixed on her anxiously.

"What is it, Nightpaw?" Rosepaw asked groggily.

"You were twitching in your sleep," the black apprentice replied. "Bad dream?"

"Bad dream," Rosepaw agreed vaguely, not wanting to describe the details of her nightmare. *I'm not even sure about what I saw. That was* weird.

"How's your shoulder?" Nightpaw asked with a glance at her wound.

"Better," Rosepaw responded. "As long as I don't open the wound again, I'll be fine."

"Good. Anyway," Nightpaw went on in a lower voice, "Do you want to sneak out again? I have a great idea of what we could do."

"What's that?" Rosepaw asked.

"You'll have to come with me to find out!" Nightpaw purred.

"Shadowpool and Minnowtail are still keeping their vigil," Rosepaw reminded her friend. "We'd be mad to try and leave while they're still on watch." *But sneaking out again* does *sound pretty fun!*

"Then we wait until they aren't watching." Nightpaw flicked his tail decisively. "They won't sit in the same place forever, will they?"

"I suppose not," Rosepaw mewed. "And besides, they've snuck out of camp before. If we get caught, at least they'll understand."

"Correction: *Minnowtail* has snuck out before," Nightpaw replied. "I don't think Shadowpool would approve, regardless of what his sister thinks. So we'd be better off just not getting caught."

"Easier said than done," Rosepaw muttered. "Let's go."

Nightpaw slithered out of the den, and Rosepaw followed behind him as quietly as she could. Outside, the deserted clearing was washed with eerie moonlight. She fluffed up her fur against the chill.

She immediately spotted Minnowtail's glowing pelt padding in circles around the fresh-kill pile. A few tail-lengths away she could see Shadowpool's dark outline sniffing at a mint bush.

Nightpaw nodded briskly and pelted across the clearing, diving into the shelter of a thick clump of ferns only a moment later.

He's so fast! Rosepaw thought incredulously.

His eyes glinted from the shadows, blinking urgently at her. With an anxious glance at the two warriors on guard, she sprinted across the camp, struggling to keep her steps light each time her paws touched the ground.

At last she made it to the ferns and bundled herself in beside Nightpaw. "Now what?" she panted, catching her breath.

"The tunnel's just over there," Nightpaw hissed. "If we stick to the camp wall, we should be able to blend into the darkness."

"That's easy for you to say," Rosepaw teased, nudging his shoulder with her muzzle. "You're like one big shadow!"

Nightpaw purred. "Well, your tortoiseshell fur is mostly dark, so you could still make it," he pointed out. "You go first."

Rosepaw wriggled past her friend, her heart pounding with mischievous excitement. She pressed herself against the prickly

barrier, wincing as some of the thorns tugged at her pelt. She kept her gaze fixed on Minnowtail and Shadowpool, who were now sitting side by side near the fern tunnel. When she was sure they wouldn't see her, she slithered forward and dropped down into the narrow tunnel. *I made it! Now let's hope Nightpaw can make it too.*

She wriggled out from the other side, shaking the dust from her pelt. A few heartbeats later Nightpaw hauled himself out too.

"I wonder who dug this hole in the first place," he panted. "And how no cat's filled it in or blocked it off by now."

"Don't jinx us!" Rosepaw meowed. "That hole is our secret way in and out of camp until someone fills it in."

"I can't wait until we're warriors. Then we won't *have* to use a secret tunnel." Nightpaw licked his paw and drew it over his ear.

"Right, what were you saying about having an idea?" Rosepaw prompted. "What are we doing this time?"

Nightpaw's eyes gleamed playfully. "You'll have to catch me first!" he mewed. Without another word he sprang to his paws and dashed off into the dark, dense forest.

"Hey! Not fair!" Rosepaw sprinted off after her friend. She felt her injured shoulder protest, but the dull ache was nothing she couldn't handle. *Besides, some exercise will do it some good so it won't stiffen up.*

Pushing herself to run faster, Rosepaw felt the familiar, shadowy trees and bushes fly past her. After her last night out of camp with Nightpaw, she had begun to see the nighttime forest as beautiful and exciting rather than creepy and unfamiliar. *I wonder if this is how MoonClan feels about their territory,* she pondered idly. *Those cats are nocturnal hunters.*

Rosepaw realized with surprise that she could see Nightpaw's tail flickering in front of her as he ran. She hadn't realized she had caught up to him so quickly.

With a playful yowl she hurled herself at Nightpaw. She felt her

paws graze his shoulders, and heard him trill in surprise. Rosepaw's weight caught him off balance, and he tumbled out from underneath her with her quickly following suit.

Rosepaw's flank bumped into something solid, and with a grunt she abruptly stopped rolling. *Must've been a tree,* she thought, her side aching from where it had hit her.

"All right, I guess you caught me." That was Nightpaw's purr, only a couple mouse-lengths away. "But you didn't have to make it so painful! I rolled right through a bunch of brambles."

"Sorry," Rosepaw laughed. "I hit my side on a tree, so I'd say we're even."

She stumbled to her paws and glanced around. *Woah, we almost ran straight to the FireClan border!* she realized. *It's a good thing we didn't cross it without knowing.*

She meowed to Nightpaw, "I didn't realize we came so close to the FireClan border."

Her friend's blue eyes glowed in the darkness. "I wanted to see how high we could climb a tree," he replied. "Maybe we could climb high enough to see into FireClan's territory!"

"We'd have to climb a tree right at the boundary!" Rosepaw gasped. "Don't forget how dense the forest is on our side. What if some cat saw us? MoonClan aren't the only nocturnal cats."

"Right," Nightpaw muttered disappointedly. "But let's still have a climbing contest. Pineclaw *has* shown you how to climb, right?" he prompted.

"Once or twice, but I've never tried it myself."

"Then I'll show you how it's done, just in case."

Nightpaw bounded toward the tree and leaped, throwing himself at the trunk. His claws sunk into the bark. Immediately he began to maneuver up the tree.

"If you stay too long in one spot," he grunted as he climbed, "your paws will start aching pretty quickly. You might lose your grip. But still, take it slowly, one paw at a time, and make sure you have a firm grip on three paws before you move the fourth."

"Got it," Rosepaw mewed. She felt the familiar anxiety she had felt when Pineclaw climbed the Sun Oak after a squirrel.

Nightpaw hauled himself up onto a low, thick branch. He pushed repeatedly on the branch, his eyes dark with caution, and then called, "This should support both of us. Come on up."

"Coming." Rosepaw wriggled her haunches and sprang up, frantically clawing at the tree for a firm grip.

"You're okay," Nightpaw encouraged her. "Even if you fall, you're only a couple tail-lengths off the ground. You'd be fine."

Rosepaw gritted her teeth, determined not to show how nervous she felt. She slowly slid one forepaw up as far as she could, and then dug her claws in deep. One paw by one, she inched her way up.

"From what I've seen, I should be climbing *way* faster than this," she muttered. "I feel slower than a dead snail."

"You've only seen experts climbing," Nightpaw responded. "They have plenty of experience. This is only your first time."

"So you're calling yourself an expert?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Mouse-brain."

Rosepaw hauled herself up to sit beside Nightpaw. "That wasn't bad," she panted, glancing at the ground below them.

"Your shoulder is bleeding a bit again." Nightpaw looked worriedly at Rosepaw's wound. "I made you overwork it, and now it's reopened."

"It's not your fault," Rosepaw meowed. "I didn't have to climb the

tree, I chose to. Besides, I can just lick the blood away and it'll be like nothing ever happened."

She twisted to begin rasping her tongue lightly over the delicate skin, wincing inwardly at the sting. She tasted the faint tang of fresh blood on her tongue.

"Here, let me do that," Nightpaw meowed.

Gratefully Rosepaw stopped and let her friend take over the grooming. The rhythmic strokes soothed her, and soon her shoulder stopped hurting. She closed her eyes and listened to the quiet hooting of owls in the distance, and the whistle of a soft breeze through the trees.

"It's so peaceful out here," she murmured to Nightpaw.

"It is," he agreed in between licks. "It's so easy to forget all the trouble in SunClan right now."

"Yeah, you would never suspect that we have rogues constantly intruding on our territory." Rosepaw suddenly felt fearful, wondering if there were rogues stalking them in the shadows. They had come far into the territory before; why wouldn't they now?

"I don't think that they'd be here now," Nightpaw mewed, seeming to guess Rosepaw's thoughts. "And if there are, I'll protect you."

"I don't need protection," Rosepaw retorted. "I can take care of myself. I fought of one of those rogues in the battle, you know. All by myself, too!"

"Oh, I can imagine he went running back to the Twolegplace," Nightpaw purred. "Probably went back to being a kittypet."

"He definitely did," Rosepaw agreed pridefully. Then she realized Nightpaw was wheedling her to not be annoyed, and added, "Mouse-brain."

"You still fell for it," Nightpaw teased her.

"It's true anyways," Rosepaw protested, feigning offense and stifling

her laughter.

"Proud furball," he continued.

"There's nothing wrong with being proud," Rosepaw mewed. "Now stop it or I'll push you out of this tree!"

Nightpaw gasped dramatically. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me." Rosepaw nudged her friend toward the edge of the branch, and he squealed. "You said it yourself: it's only a couple tail-lengths down. You wouldn't get hurt. Or maybe you're just scared!"

"Am not!" Nightpaw was struggling to hold back a purr.

"Are so!" Rosepaw nudged him again, and he cuffed her over the ear. "Okay, I'll stop," she conceded with a laugh.

Another peaceful silence stretched out, until Nightpaw murmured, "You know you can tell me if anything is worrying you, right?"

Rosepaw blinked, startled. *Does he know I have suspicions about Minnowtail?* she wondered in alarm. *Or maybe he's talking about Pineclaw.*

She decided she didn't feel comfortable discussing Pineclaw with her friend. "Don't tell anyone else," she whispered, "but I feel kind of suspicious of Minnowtail."

She felt the fur on Nightpaw's flank tingle with surprise, but she detected no anger. "Why is that?" he prompted.

"I...I don't really know," Rosepaw admitted. "But she just seems so arrogant, and she hardly ever listens to any cat. Do you remember when she was talking about true warriors never being scared, and then Cherryfur told her off?"

Nightpaw nodded. "I remember. It was funny to see Minnowtail put in her place for once!"

"She wasn't put in her place, though," Rosepaw retorted. "After

Cherryfur walked away, I heard her mutter that she didn't believe her."

"Are you sure you weren't just hearing things?" Nightpaw asked doubtfully.

"I know what I heard!" Rosepaw dug her claws into the tree branch. *Why doesn't anyone believe me when I talk about this?* she wondered frustratedly. *Does no one else see what I see in Minnowtail?*

"Minnowtail seems like a fine cat to me," Nightpaw went on. "I think you're just getting worked up over nothing."

Rosepaw realized in defeat that her friend was already convinced of his own opinion, and his mind wasn't changing. *And I didn't even mention the way she looked at Adderstar during her warrior ceremony!*

She shrugged. "It's probably nothing, but I still know what I heard."

I'm only saying that so that this whole Minnowtail thing doesn't mess up our friendship, Rosepaw thought briskly. *But Nightpaw's mind isn't changing, and neither is mine. I don't care what any other cat says; Minnowtail is bound to cause some sort of trouble. I just* know *it.*

Chapter 17

The sun was already beginning to rise when Rosepaw and Nightpaw crawled back into their nests in the apprentice den. *I hope I can catch a bit of sleep before the day starts,* Rosepaw thought.

But she didn't get her wish; she barely had time to close her eyes before Pineclaw's head popped into the den. "Hunting patrol, Rosepaw," he mewed.

Rosepaw mumbled incoherently, pretending she had just woken up, and then responded, "All right, coming."

As she rose from her nest yet again, Nightpaw murmured sympathetically. "Bad luck." Rosepaw twitched her ears in rueful acknowledgment and padded out of the den.

The Clan was beginning to stir. Beestripe was below the Cliffrock, with a few warriors sitting around him, waiting to be chosen for the morning patrols. Pineclaw was waiting for her beside the fern tunnel with Birchpelt.

As she trotted over to join them, she felt something soft brushing her legs. Surprised, she glanced down and saw Acornkit scampering around her.

"Please can I come with you?" she squeaked, her green eyes shining eagerly. "Look, I can hunt too!"

Rosepaw watched in amusement as the kit pounced clumsily on a nearby leaf, and rolled over with it caught in her tiny claws. "You'll be a fantastic hunter when you're an apprentice," she meowed.

"But I want to be a hunter *now*!" Acornkit sprang to her paws and stared hopefully at Rosepaw.

"Acornkit!" Rainfoot stuck her head out of the nursery entrance, her eyes stern. "Get back in here at once! It's feeding time."

Despondent, Acornkit stomped back into the nursery.

When Rosepaw joined her hunting patrol, Birchpelt commented proudly, "She's a firebrand, isn't she?"

Rosepaw purred. "She'll be a feisty apprentice!" Hopefully she added, "I'll be a warrior by then. Maybe I could mentor her, or one of the other kits."

"That would be great," Pineclaw mewed, gazing at his apprentice. "Now, let's get moving."

As the patrol walked along the familiar trail, Rosepaw struggled not to limp. Her shoulder was starting to ache again, and she licked it every few moments to make sure it didn't start bleeding. *If anyone notices, they'll want to know how I opened the wound again. Then I'll get Nightpaw and I in trouble.*

Trying to put it out of her mind, she lifted her nose to search for prey. It wasn't long before she sniffed out a mousehole, and she was praised by both Pineclaw and Birchpelt when she pointed it out.

"Here's what we'll do," Birchpelt meowed. "I'll run over and scare the mice, so they all come running out. Catch as many as you can before they can scatter."

Rosepaw nodded, while Pineclaw said, "Sounds good!"

The three cats crouched in a half-circle around the hole. Birchpelt scuffed his paws loudly in the dirt and let out a yowl. Rosepaw instantly heard panicked squealing from inside the hole. At least four mice scurried out within a heartbeat.

Rosepaw leaped forward eagerly, sinking her claws into one while grabbing another with her teeth. As she dispatched both of them, she saw Birchpelt slamming his paw down on the neck of a mouse, and heard the cracking of tiny bones.

She sat up with her catch at her paws and glanced at Pineclaw. Her mentor was empty-pawed.

"Mouse dung!" he scoffed. "I didn't catch a single thing."

"Bad luck," Birchpelt sympathized. "There's still plenty of time. Let's bury these and keep hunting."

As Rosepaw started digging her preyhole, she felt a sharp pain in her injured shoulder and yowled. A couple licks proved that her wound was bleeding yet again. *Oh, great.*

"You opened the gash on your shoulder," Pineclaw observed worriedly.

"Yeah, I kind of noticed," Rosepaw muttered. *I don't want to go back to camp and sit in the medicine den,* she thought frustratedly. *I just want to hunt like a normal cat!* "It's nothing, really. Can we keep hunting?"

"No, I'm taking you back to camp to see Grayleaf," Pineclaw answered with a shake of his head. "Birchpelt, I'll find you again once she's back at camp."

"I can find my own way back," Rosepaw protested. "You don't have to guide me."

"Stop arguing, and come on." Pineclaw's tone was stern, and Rosepaw stifled a sigh. She followed behind him, not bothering to lift her tail as it left a trail in the earth.

After a while Pineclaw commented, "I noticed dried blood on the wound before we started hunting."

"I must've rolled around in my nest," Rosepaw mumbled, acutely aware of her lie. "I guess I opened it a bit on accident."

Pineclaw shook his head. "I don't think so. You smelled of the forest when you left your nest. You didn't sleep, did you?"

Fox dung! This day just gets better and better, doesn't it?

"All right, fine. I went out during the night because I couldn't sleep." Rosepaw was careful not to say anything about Nightpaw coming with her. *He doesn't need to get in trouble for no reason.*

"You know how sensitive your shoulder is right now," Pineclaw

scolded. "You should know better than to be so careless with it."

"If you'd noticed it before we went hunting, why didn't you say anything?" Rosepaw challenged. "Why didn't you tell me to go see Grayleaf?"

"Because I expected you to take better care of yourself, and go tell Grayleaf yourself," Pineclaw snapped. "You shouldn't wait for some other cat to tell you to."

Rosepaw hissed and stomped ahead of her mentor, not wanting to talk anymore. *I just want to be able to do everything normally again. But this stupid, StarClan-forsaken wound isn't helping at all!*

She padded along the trail, eyes on her paws, until she felt Pineclaw's warm pelt brushing hers. "I just don't want you hurting yourself worse," he murmured.

In spite of the pleasant tingle his touch left behind, Rosepaw flinched away from Pineclaw. "I'm fine on my own," she growled. "I don't need anyone hovering over me like I'm a kit just out of the nursery!"

"I'm your mentor. It's my *job* to hover over you, you know." Pineclaw wasn't backing down.

"Please, just let me go back to camp alone," Rosepaw mumbled despondently. "I really don't want to talk. I can find my way back myself."

She stared at her paws until, finally, she felt Pineclaw pull away from her. As he padded away, she felt the comforting flick of his tail over her ear, much gentler than usual. Then he was gone.

Rosepaw sighed inwardly. *How does he always know the best time to do that?* she wondered fondly. Then she shook her head. *He worries about me too much. It's only a bit of blood; I'm not dying!* She felt a surge of indignation. *I might be younger than you, Pineclaw, but I'm not some helpless kit.*

As she stalked toward camp, ignoring her aching shoulder, she asked herself, *Shouldn't I be happy that he cares about me that much? I*

want *him to like me, after all.* Suddenly Rosepaw felt a pang of guilt. *I pushed him away when all he wanted to do was see if I was okay. Mouse-brain!*

She hoped that Pineclaw wouldn't hold a grudge against her for being so careless and rude. Or worse—she hoped he wouldn't tell Adderstar about her night out of the SunClan camp. Apprentices weren't supposed to leave camp without permission.

When she came into camp, the clearing was dotted with cats sprawled out to warm themselves in the weak sunlight. The air was content, but it veiled the worry that every cat in the Clan was beginning to feel. Leaf-fall was taking hold of the forest, and tensions between SunClan and the rogues were rising at an alarming rate.

Rosepaw shuddered. *I hope we'll be strong enough to fend off both threats.*

"Rosepaw? I smell blood. Are you okay?" Dawnpaw's concerned mew reached her ears. "You didn't fall out with another bramble bush, did you?"

"No." Rosepaw rolled her eyes. "I just opened my shoulder cut on accident. Really, I'm fine."

"You're fine when I say you are," Dawnpaw replied firmly. "Come on, let's go get you a new marigold poultice."

"It's only a bit of blood," Rosepaw muttered. She hated the way she was fussed over when there was really nothing to worry about. *Why does every cat think I'm so* helpless*?*

"That blood came from an open wound, which could lead to an infection," Dawnpaw meowed. "And an infection is the last thing a cat needs at the start of leaf-bare. You'll be weakened, and then you'll probably get—"

"I get it, okay?" Rosepaw hissed. "Just take me to Grayleaf and get the stupid poultice on." She was too furious to feel guilty for being so curt to her sister.

Dawnpaw winced visibly. "I was only telling you to be more careful next time," she snapped. Rosepaw could hear the hurt in her voice as she pulled ahead, clearly not wanting to talk to her anymore.

It was warm and dim in the medicine cat den, and the air smelled strongly of herbs and moss. Grayleaf was pawing at a small pile of furry, pale green leaves that carried a tempting smell. Rosepaw recognized it as catmint, the best remedy for whitecough and greencough. She was murmuring to herself, "This won't be enough if more than one cat gets sick...need to find more..."

"Hi, Grayleaf. Rosepaw's opened her wound on accident." Dawnpaw's greeting was tight, as if she was trying hard not to sound irritated. "She'll need some cobwebs and marigold."

Grayleaf glanced up. "Yes, go get them from the herb store," she ordered. "I'll get her settled in a nest." She turned to Rosepaw and flicked her tail towards a neat mound of moss and dried bracken. "Wait there."

Rosepaw crouched in the nest and began licking her shoulder, cleaning it thoroughly. *If they're so determined to make a fuss over nothing, I might as well make their job easier.*

A moment later Dawnpaw returned. She was walking on three paws, with a wad of cobwebs stuck on her fourth, and she carried a few marigold leaves in her jaws. She gave the herbs to Grayleaf, who said something to her that Rosepaw couldn't hear. Her sister nodded, almost gratefully, and quickly trotted back out of the den.

Once the cream-colored apprentice was out of earshot, Grayleaf mewed, "I sent her to go look for some catmint in the forest. I could tell she wasn't happy with you the moment you two walked in." The old medicine cat began examining her shoulder. "So what's going on between you and Dawnpaw?"

Rosepaw ignored the question. She didn't want to talk about Dawnpaw now. Instead she replied bitterly, "Are you going to scold me too? Are you going to tell me I should be more *careful*?" She spat the last word like venom. Her annoyance was starting to bubble over.

Grayleaf seemed surprised by Rosepaw's harshness, but she didn't seem angry. "This is about more than just an injured shoulder, isn't it?" she prompted.

Rosepaw flinched as the sting of marigold briefly seared her cut, but also because of how accurate Grayleaf's assumption was.

"I hate how everyone's constantly treating me like I'm weak and useless," she confessed. "I know I'm only an apprentice, but it's still not fair! I've been in training for more than a moon. I'm not helpless, but everyone seems to think that I am! Adderstar, Pineclaw, Dawnpaw, Nightpaw..." Rosepaw felt more miserable the more cats she named.

"You've proved that you can take of yourself already," Grayleaf reminded her. "Cherryfur was talking about how bravely you fought against the rogues."

"All the rest of the Clan saw was a tiny apprentice, unconscious and half-dead, carried into camp." Rosepaw felt sick as she imagined what she must have looked like after the battle. *No wonder no one thinks I can hold my own.*

"They respected you for fighting so hard to defend your Clan, and to survive your wounds," Grayleaf insisted. Her tone was more brisk now. "They know you're strong. Can't you see that?"

"Then why are Dawnpaw and Pineclaw getting so worked up over a small wound?" Rosepaw retorted.

"It's not small, and you know it no matter how hard you try to deny it," Grayleaf growled. "Dawnpaw and Pineclaw are only looking after you as they would for any other of their Clanmates. You should have the sense to understand that!" She shook her head with exasperation.

Suddenly feeling exhausted after arguing with so many cats, Rosepaw let her head droop into the nest and didn't respond. *I* am *being stupid,* she realized suddenly. *I was only thinking about myself, and that they thought I couldn't take care of myself. But they're just SunClan cats that are worried about an injured Clanmate.*

"I'm sorry, Grayleaf," she whispered. "My pride always gets in the way. I'm being such a mouse-brain."

Grayleaf's reply was surprisingly gentle. "We all have the right to be proud. But you must know when you need to accept help from someone else."

"Thank you. I understand." Rosepaw sighed inwardly.

She waited in silence as Grayleaf dressed her wound with cobweb, and then limped out of the medicine den after the gray she-cat ordered her to take it easy until sunhigh. She settled in her nest in the apprentice den—which was empty with Nightpaw out on patrol now—and closed her eyes.

A dream spread out in front of her. She was standing in the center of the SunClan camp. She realized in horror that the clearing was alive with clawing, wailing, screeching cats. The stench of the rogues bathed Rosepaw's tongue. *They've made it all the way to the camp! There's so many of them...StarClan, help us!*

Rosepaw unsheathed her claws and spun around wildly, searching for her first target. The faces and scents were blurred to her; she could only just make out the difference between Clan and rogue.

Suddenly, her eyes locked with those of one cat, the only one she could see and smell clearly. She instantly recognized the black-and-white pelt and amber eyes as round as full moons.

This is the same cat from my last dream!

Rosepaw gasped as the familiar current of rage blazed through her at the mere sight of him. *I still don't know what he did...* Her thoughts ran wild, tainted by a strange grief. *All I know is that he* will *pay for what he's done.*

She screeched in fury and charged at the patched tom. He crouched to meet her head-on, although his eyes held a faint glimmer of fear in their depths.

As Rosepaw leaped, her vision blurred, stained with splotches the color of blood. She felt the tearing of fur and flesh beneath her

claws and tasted warm blood flooding over her, inspiring a deep, cold satisfaction that she loved and hated at the same time.

I'm doing it again! she wailed silently. *What's wrong with me? Am I some kind of heartless murderer?*

A shriek sliced into Rosepaw's dream, and she jumped. Suddenly she was back in her nest, curled up and still trembling with horror at her actions.

Groggy, she was trying to figure out if the shriek had been in her dream or in reality. Then she received her answer in the form of another yowl, high-pitched with distress. It was Rainfoot.

"Help! Help! I can't find my kits!"

Chapter 18

Alarmed, Rosepaw jumped from her nest and staggered out. She narrowed her eyes against the bright sun, which had now risen to its highest point. *So much time has passed, and I feel like I've hardly slept at all!*

Birchpelt was circling his mate, trying to calm her down, but his eyes were dark with anxiety. Adderstar and Beestripe were bounding among the Clan, asking every cat when and where they had last seen the kits. *All four of them must have gone missing,* Rosepaw realized. *Oh, StarClan!*

Nightpaw broke away from the crowd and raced over to her. "This is horrible!" he yelped. "There's four of them, in an entire territory! How could we possibly find them all?"

"They're probably sticking together," Rosepaw responded, her voice shaking. "And besides, if we find one, we can figure out where the rest are."

Nightpaw took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Let's go see if we can help search for them," he suggested.

Rosepaw followed her friend into the throng of anxious cats. They ended up beside Adderstar.

"Nightpaw, Rosepaw," he meowed. "You both went on patrol this morning. When did you last see the kits? Did they say anything to you?"

Nightpaw shook his head. "Nothing."

Rosepaw mewed, "Acornkit came up to me and asked if she could join our hunting patrol. Rainfoot sent her back to the nursery. She could have snuck out with her littermates out of frustration."

Adderstar nodded slowly. "That would make sense. Kits have their

mouse-brained moments."

At any other time Rosepaw would have purred in amusement. But a cold knot of fear formed in her belly. *This "mouse-brained moment" could get all four kits killed.*

Adderstar shouldered his way through the other cats and scrambled up onto the Cliffrock. "SunClan, hear my words!" he yowled, raising his tail for silence. The anxious voices died down.

"I know we are all worried for the safety of Rainfoot's kits," he began. "But I'm certain we can find them, and they'll all come home safe and sound." His fiery amber eyes raked over the Clan. "We will send out search parties to scour the entire territory. We won't stop until we find them!"

Yowls of agreement rose up. Rosepaw looked around and saw Rainfoot and Birchpelt gazing up at their leader, eyes glistening with gratitude.

"Beestripe," Adderstar instructed, "organize the search patrols. I'll lead one myself. I'll take Cherryfur, Thumpstep, and Ebonypelt. We'll search the edge of Clan territory." He glanced at each cat as he named them, and they all nodded, gathering beside the fern tunnel to wait for their leader.

Nightpaw twitched his ears. "Let's go make sure we're on one of those patrols," he meowed determinedly.

Rosepaw nodded in agreement and followed him towards Beestripe. *My shoulder doesn't hurt anymore,* she thought. *I hope Beestripe doesn't confine me to camp just because of my injury. Just because I'm wounded doesn't mean my nose doesn't work!*

"Minnowtail, Shadowpool, Birchpelt, and Shinefur," Beestripe was meowing. "You can search near the Twolegplace. I wouldn't put it past those fox-hearted rogues to try and harm helpless kits."

Birchpelt hissed in fury, digging his claws into the ground as if it was the pelt of a rogue. "I'd like to see them try," he spat. He raced away along with the other members of his patrol.

"Robinfeather, Willowstripe, Thrushtail, and Nightpaw," Beestripe went on briskly, "you can search along the MoonClan border."

"Good luck!" Rosepaw told Nightpaw, touching her nose to his ear before he bounded away.

"Patchflower, Quickstorm, Harefoot, and Forestfire can search the heart of our territory."

The chosen cats stalked toward the camp exit. Rosepaw held her breath, hoping for her name to be called.

"Hazelfrost, Juniperfur, Pineclaw, and Rosepaw." *Yes!* "You'll take the FireClan border." *If those arrogant mange-pelts have harmed one whisker on those kits, they'll get what's coming to them!* Rosepaw flattened her ears and scuffed the ground with one claw-spiked paw.

"Let's go, Rosepaw!" Pineclaw was calling to her. She raced over to her patrol, and Hazelfrost led the way out of camp. Every cat was tense, their ears pricked and noses up for any sign of the kits.

Rosepaw noticed that Pineclaw didn't seem to be angry at her for arguing with him earlier. When he asked her if she could scent anything out of the ordinary, his tone gave nothing away except his fear for the kits' safety. *That's good,* she thought with relief. *I thought for a while that I'd ruined anything we had between us.*

Juniperfur suddenly halted, bending down to sniff carefully at the roots of a young oak. "I can smell them!" he meowed. "Acornkit's is the strongest scent...great StarClan, she left a scent marker here!"

Hazelfrost rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Kits will be kits." She bounded over to smell the marker. "Is there a trail?"

"It seems so," Juniperfur replied. He waved his tail. "It leads that way."

"Straight to the FireClan border?" Rosepaw gasped. "What were they thinking? Did they *want* to be captured by a rival Clan?"

"Not on our watch," Pineclaw growled. "Let's keep going. They can't

have gone much farther on their little legs."

Juniperfur and Hazelfrost tracked the kits' scent, while Rosepaw and Pineclaw trailed behind to look for more clues.

"What if the kits *were* taken by FireClan?" Rosepaw whispered fearfully to her mentor. "How will we get them back?"

"We'll fight for them if we have to," Pineclaw meowed darkly. "But I don't think even Amberstar would try and harm helpless kits. The warrior code itself forbids it!"

Rosepaw felt slightly comforted. But a question rang in her mind: *What do we do if FireClan doesn't follow the warrior code?* She shuddered as she imagined returning to camp and telling Rainfoot that her kits had been killed by a rival Clan. *No! They can't harm those kits, they wouldn't!*

Pineclaw's warm flank pressed against her, and Rosepaw realized she was trembling. Gratefully she walked along the kits' scent trail with her fur brushing his.

"We're getting close to the border," Hazelfrost muttered, her fur bristling. "And the kits' scent is getting stronger."

Rosepaw lifted her muzzle, opening her mouth to taste the air. The general forest smells, overpowered by the reek of FireClan, with hints of the kits...*and what in the name of StarClan is that stench?* It was a very faint scent, but disgusting all the same. It reminded Rosepaw vaguely of the dogs she smelled at the Twolegplace, mixed with crow-food. *Whatever that is, it's not a cat.*

She noticed the patrol had halted, and quickly stopped before she bumped into another cat's hindquarters. "What's going on?" she asked. *Do any of you smell that?* she added silently.

"The kits' trail stops here," Juniperfur meowed, sounding puzzled and worried. "Where could they have gone?"

Rosepaw concentrated hard, sniffing until her nose almost hurt. She broke off from the patrol, heading to the right. The faintest taint of the strange reek was over here...*wait!* She could smell the kits!

"Over here!" she called. "I've found something!"

"What is it?" Pineclaw demanded, bounding up to her.

"I can smell the kits," Rosepaw mewed. "And there's something else...kind of like a dog, but it's not a dog. What is it?"

Pineclaw's eyes narrowed as she spoke. He tasted the air for himself, and then gasped, his hackles rising.

"It's a fox!" he hissed. "A fox found the kits!"

Rosepaw thought of the elders' talk of the big, russet menaces that killed for fun and enjoyed preying on kits and other weak cats. She felt her own fur bristle in horror.

"Oh, StarClan, no!" Hazelfrost pelted in the direction of the scent, with Juniperfur hard on her heels.

"Good job," Pineclaw said. "You might have just saved these kits' lives." He bounded off after the other two warriors.

Rosepaw knew there was no time to feel proud of what she'd done. She quickly followed Pineclaw, her heart pounding. *StarClan, don't let us be too late,* she prayed desperately.

When she burst through a clump of tall grass, her heart lurched with fear. Hazelfrost and Juniperfur were side by side, spitting furiously at a huge, dog-like figure with stinking red fur and a long, pointed snout. And cowering among the roots of a tree were Rainfoot's kits. Pineclaw had planted himself in front of them, claws unsheathed to swipe at the fox if it came too close.

"I'll rip your mangy fur off!" Hazelfrost snarled, leaping at the fox with gleaming claws. Juniperfur slithered to one side and began clawing at its flank. Rosepaw quickly took up the other side, slashing and ducking to avoid the fox's swinging head as it tried to dislodge Hazelfrost.

"Kill it! Kill it!" The kits began cheering for the fighting warriors, their cries high-pitched with fear and relief. Pineclaw silenced them with a growl.

With a howl laced with pain and fury, the fox threw Hazelfrost down. While she lay winded in the dirt, it turned on Juniperfur and began snapping its mangled teeth at him. A screech of pain told Rosepaw that the fox had made its mark, and courage shot through her.

"Leave him alone!" she shrieked, springing onto the fox's shoulders. She dug her claws in for a firm grip and sunk her teeth into its shoulders. The fox yelped, stumbling backwards. Rosepaw held on as tight as she could, slashing both of its pointy ears. *That'll teach you not to mess with SunClan!*

Then the fox whipped its head around and bit hard into her forepaw. With a screech of pain, Rosepaw lost her grip and slid down, landing with a thump that drove the breath out of her. She tried to scramble out of reach, but her paw was limp with pain, and she couldn't move very far. *Oh, no—*

She shrieked as the fox's teeth met in her scruff, and in a heartbeat she was lifted off the ground, shaken like a piece of prey. Rosepaw flailed her legs wildly, desperate to escape, but there was nothing she could do. *StarClan, help me!*

A yowl of pure anger startled her, and suddenly she was tossed aside, landing with a cloud of dust rising around her. Coughing in an effort to catch her breath, Rosepaw looked up and saw Pineclaw clinging to the fox's back, slashing savagely at its pelt. *He's defending me!* Rosepaw felt weak with gratitude. *He saved my life.*

Hazelfrost was guarding the kits now, looking as protective as if they were her own, while Juniperfur was darting under the fox, slicing and nipping its legs as he went.

"Rosepaw! Can you stand?" Hazelfrost yowled.

"I can try!" Rosepaw snarled. *I have to help them!* Ignoring her paw as it screeched in protest, Rosepaw staggered up and charged at the fox.

"Nice of you to rejoin," Juniperfur panted.

"I wouldn't miss this," Rosepaw replied as she started helping him to unbalance the fox. "But hasn't this mange-pelt had enough yet?"

Before Juniperfur could respond, Pineclaw yowled, "Clawing the legs isn't working! Get its tail!"

"I'm on it!" Rosepaw called, slithering between the fox's legs like a snake. She gripped its bushy tail with her forepaws, gagging as the stench hit the back of her throat. With a massive effort, she tugged the fox's tail to one side.

The fox howled, stumbled, and then fell sideways. Pineclaw sprang off of its back just in time to avoid being crushed.

"Nice work, Rosepaw!" Hazelfrost meowed.

"Make a defensive line in front of the kits!" Juniperfur ordered. "Quick, while the fox is still downed."

Rosepaw bounded over to stand in front of Hazelfrost, with Pineclaw and Juniperfur flanking her in a heartbeat.

When the fox finally found its paws, it yelped when it saw the line of cats facing it threateningly.

"Get off our territory!" Juniperfur hissed.

"Leave our kits alone!" Pineclaw spat.

Rosepaw knew the fox couldn't understand exactly what the warriors were saying, but their tones and visages were clear enough. It spun around and began limping away, its tail dragging in the earth.

"The kits are safe now," Hazelfrost mewed. "I'll go make sure that fox leaves Clan territory for good." She bounded away after the fox.

"Be careful, and call for help if you need it!" Juniperfur called after her.

"We actually did it," Rosepaw gasped.
Pineclaw turned to her, touching his nose to her head. "You were

brilliant!" he purred. "You fought braver than I ever imagined you would."

Rosepaw purred. "You saved my life when the fox had picked me up," she said. "Thank you."

She glanced sideways to find Juniperfur watching them wryly. She wasn't even embarrassed. *I don't care who knows that I like Pineclaw,* she thought happily. *Who wouldn't like him, anyway? He's strong, brave, caring...*

"There *is* another matter to discuss," Pineclaw meowed, pulling away from Rosepaw. He turned to face the four kits. "What in StarClan's name are we going to do with you?"

Acornkit strided forward, lifting her chin. Her eyes shone with amazement. "You were so brave!" she squeaked. "That thing won't forget the scratches you gave it."

"Yeah, you saved us!" Crowkit added.

"I'm going to be as brave as you when I'm a warrior!" Leafkit mewled.

"I'll be braver than you, Leafkit!" Flashkit taunted.

"Will not!"

"Will too!"

"That's enough," Pineclaw ordered. "Do you realize the uproar you've caused? Rainfoot and Birchpelt are worried sick about you. Almost the entire Clan is searching the forest for you! What were you thinking?"

"Let them explain themselves to Adderstar when we get back," Juniperfur meowed. "I'm sure they'll get a good scolding from him."

"Oh, no!" Leafkit whispered.

"Not Adderstar!" Crowkit wailed. "He's scary!"

"You brought this on yourselves," Juniperfur responded. "Now, be quiet and—"

"Now, *that* was an interesting fight. And all because your kits have thistledown for brains."

Rosepaw whipped around, fur bristling with surprise. Suddenly she realized how close the patrol had been to the FireClan border. And standing at the scent line was a line of three FireClan warriors.

"What did you say?" Pineclaw growled quietly. He stepped up to stand beside Rosepaw and added to her, "Stay close to me."

"I said that you fought that fox pretty well, considering you're from SunClan." The middle cat, a spotted dark ginger she-cat, was the one who had spoken. Her lip was curled in a sneer. "It was entertaining to watch."

Juniperfur's eyes widened in horrified anger. "You mean you *watched* us fight the fox? And you didn't even try to help us?"

"We weren't about to be accused of crossing borders without permission," the she-cat hissed. "You might think you're smart, but you still can't fool us!"

"You saw the fox about to attack helpless kits!" Juniperfur spat. "What kind of warriors do you think you are?"

"They're hardly worthy of being called warriors," Pineclaw growled.

"At least we teach our kits to follow the warrior code." The she-cat's amber gaze snapped over to the kits. She sniffed with disdain. "Even the smallest kit knows they aren't allowed outside of camp until they are six moons old. But I suppose SunClan doesn't teach *their* kits the code."

Rosepaw felt her heart lurch with anger. In that moment, her patience with these arrogant cats snapped. In spite of Pineclaw's orders to stay beside him, she marched up to the scent line and thrust her muzzle into the ginger she-cat's face. She was trembling with fury.

"You say that you teach your kits to follow the warrior code, when you don't even follow it yourselves!" she snarled. "You watched four kits about to be eaten by a fox and didn't do *anything* to help them! That itself goes against the code, so stop acting like you're the superiors, you arrogant pieces of—"

"*Rosepaw!*" Pineclaw's hiss drew her attention away. She glanced over her shoulder and realized that her mentor's eyes were narrowed in fury. His tone was icy. "Come back here *right now* and keep your mouth shut."

"But they—"

"Now!"

With a last mutinous glare at the FireClan cats, Rosepaw slunk back to stand beside her mentor.

"It seems your Clan needs to learn how to keep *all* their young cats in line," the ginger cat smirked. "We'll leave you to that. Let's go, patrol," she added to her companions. Then the three cats stalked away into their territory.

"Don't think that Adderstar won't mention this at the next Gathering!" Juniperfur yowled after them.

Rosepaw stared at him in disbelief. *Oh, so he gets to say something about this, but I don't?* She knew she was an apprentice, and he was a senior warrior. But it still didn't seem fair; they had the same opinion, so why wasn't she allowed to voice it herself?

She dropped her gaze to her paws when Pineclaw's eyes burned into her. She could feel his disapproval in every moment he stared at her, and wished miserably that the ground would swallow her up.

Pineclaw heaved a deep sigh. "Let's get these kits back to camp," he meowed. "I'm sure Adderstar will have something to say to the *five* of you."

Chapter 19

Even FireClan knows better than to disobey the warrior code.

The statement ran through Rosepaw's mind as her patrol returned to the camp through the tunnel of ivy and ferns. It was something Pineclaw had said to her on her first day out of camp as a new apprentice. *Looks like he was wrong,* she thought.

Although the memory of those three FireClan warriors—that stupid dark ginger she-cat in particular—stirred up a deep anger in her, she forced herself to keep her fur flat, mouth shut, and claws sheathed. *Pineclaw is already furious as it is. No need to make things worse.*

Every other search patrol had returned, and the Clan was gathered in the clearing. They gasped when they saw the wounds that every cat in the patrol bore. Then they noticed the four little bundles that were carried between Pineclaw and Juniperfur, and began yowling with relief and approval.

"They found the kits!"

"FireClan *must've* had something to do with it."

"Look at their wounds!"

"Are the kits injured too?"

Adderstar shouldered his way through the crowd, flanked by Rainfoot and Birchpelt. Juniperfur and Pineclaw laid the kits down, and they scurried up to their mother, mewling happily.

"All four of them are safe," Juniperfur assured the couple.

"Oh, my kits!" Rainfoot was purring so hard she could barely speak. "Thank you, thank you so much! I thought I'd lost them for good!"

Adderstar's eyes narrowed, and he looked around. "Where is

Hazelfrost?" he asked.

"She's leading a fox out of Clan territory," Pineclaw responded pointedly.

"A fox? Oh, my goodness!" Rainfoot's eyes were wide and round as full moons. She wrapped her tail protectively around her four kits. The rest of the Clan had heard the queen's echo and were gasping with shock.

"So *that's* why they're hurt so badly!"

"Thank StarClan the kits weren't killed."

"I hope that fox never comes back to SunClan!"

"Now, now." Adderstar waved his tail for silence. "The patrol can tell their story later. Right now, I need to ask these kits a few questions."

"We're crowfood now," Crowkit muttered.

"Hush and listen to your leader," Rainfoot ordered.

Adderstar sat down, with the kits in a line in front of him. "So, why in StarClan's name did you think it was a good idea to sneak out of camp?" he prompted. The wry curiosity in his tone almost made Rosepaw snicker, but she knew better. "Did you *want* to get eaten by a fox?"

Acornkit stepped forward, her head bowed sulkily. "It was my idea, Adderstar," she announced. "I convinced the rest of them to come with me."

"But why did you do it?" Adderstar repeated.

Acornkit shot a guilty glance at Rosepaw, and then replied, "I found a tunnel beside the elders' den that goes under the camp wall. It...it smelled of Rosepaw and Nightpaw, so I thought it would be fun to follow the scent trail through the forest."

Around her, Rosepaw's world seemed to stop moving. Her vision

blurred from horror.

It's my fault the kits snuck out, she realized despairingly. *They were following* my *scent trail. They almost got killed, because of me!*

She didn't dare look up. She knew what she would see: dozens of eyes all staring at her in disapproval, knowing that if the kits had died, it would have been her fault. She wondered where Nightpaw was in the crowd, and what was going through his head.

"Thank you for being honest." Adderstar's voice sounded distant and echoey to Rosepaw. "But you must never, *ever* do something like this again. You had the entire Clan worried sick, searching for you in the forest."

"We're sorry, Adderstar!" Leafkit wailed.

"We won't do it again," Crowkit promised.

"We'll be good from now on!" Flashkit vowed.

"Enough of that," Rainfoot chided. "Off to the nursery with you. When I get back, you're all getting a good grooming. Just *look* at all the burrs and knots in your pelts!"

Rosepaw winced visibly as Adderstar said, "The Clan is dismissed. Rosepaw, Nightpaw, come see me in my den."

She trudged forward, following Adderstar to his den underneath the Cliffrock. Nightpaw appeared from the crowd and fell in line beside her.

"What have we done?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It'll be okay," Rosepaw murmured, trying to sound more certain than she felt. Inwardly she didn't think that *anything* would be okay.

Adderstar's den was spacious and warm; a neat nest of moss and feathers lay against the back wall. The left wall was scored with various scratch marks, indicating that the Clan leader liked to sharpen his claws there.

The three cats sat down in the center of the cave.

"So, what's this I hear about you two using a tunnel beside the elders' den?" Adderstar prompted. His eyes were narrowed, his expression unreadable.

Before Nightpaw could say anything, Rosepaw spoke up. She was determined not to let anyone else get in trouble as badly as she was.

"Nightpaw didn't do anything wrong! I found the tunnel one day while I was bringing food to the elders. I showed the tunnel to Nightpaw one night, asking if he would sneak out with me, but he wouldn't come with me, so I went out by myself. His scent was only left there from when he was checking out the tunnel. The kits followed *my* trail into the forest. He had nothing to do with this."

She was aware of Nightpaw stiffening with utter surprise and shock. She didn't dare look at him, for fear of Adderstar realizing she was lying. She just stared at her leader, willing him to believe her.

To her relief, the SunClan leader didn't seem to suspect anything. "I'm glad you were honest with me, Rosepaw," he murmured. He nodded briskly to Nightpaw. "You can go, but find Pineclaw and ask him to come to my den, please."

"Yes, Adderstar," Nightpaw replied, dipping his head. With a last glance at Rosepaw, he slipped out of the den.

"You have no idea how sorry I am," Rosepaw whispered. "This is all my fault. Those poor kits could have been killed because of me." Inside her, a tiny sense of relief wormed through her. *At least Nightpaw isn't in trouble. He doesn't deserve to be punished for this. But me...I have some lessons to learn.*

"Not only that, but you've also been leaving the camp without permission." Adderstar's voice was hard, just as Rosepaw had expected. "Did you have any reason?"

"Mostly just for fun," Rosepaw meowed, knowing she was telling the truth about that. "But I wanted to practice hunting at night, too."

I hope he believes me this time, too. I don't want to be accused of seeing

a cat from another Clan, or something —especially since I'm really not!

The vines over the den entrance shivered, and Pineclaw entered. "You wanted to see me?" he mewed.

"Yes. Firstly, did you know your apprentice has been sneaking out at night?"

Pineclaw nodded. "She confessed it this morning, before the kits went missing." His eyes narrowed. "But she never told me that Nightpaw had anything to do with it."

"He didn't," Adderstar responded. "His scent was there, yes, but he didn't sneak out with Rosepaw."

"Oh, okay." Pineclaw sounded relieved that his apprentice hadn't been keeping more than one secret from him. *He doesn't need to know that I actually am.*

"Now, you can tell me about the fight with the fox," Adderstar prompted.

"Well, it started when Rosepaw picked up the scent of the fox, leading right up to the FireClan border," Pineclaw began. "We came into the clearing and the fox was stalking the kits, so we sprang in to defend them. Every cat that fought was injured, but nothing too serious. The kits are frightened but unhurt."

He shot a proud look at Rosepaw and added, "In spite of everything that we just found out, Rosepaw still fought like a warrior. She protected those kits with her life, and I believe that makes up for what she did, at least in part."

"I'm glad to hear that," Adderstar responded.

"There's one more thing," Pineclaw went on. "After we chased the fox away, a patrol of FireClan warriors came up to the border and told us that they'd watched us fight the fox. They were there when it was stalking the kits, too, and didn't do a single thing to help."

Adderstar's ears flattened against his head, and he growled quietly but said nothing. Pineclaw swept on. Rosepaw knew which part was

coming next.

"I told her to stay beside me, but Rosepaw stepped up to stand a whisker-length away from them, saying what I know you're thinking now: that they were acting like cowardly hypocrites." He turned his head, now speaking to Rosepaw directly. "I know you're upset about it. We all are. But I told you to stay beside me, and you should have obeyed, no matter how you felt about it."

"I know, Pineclaw," Rosepaw replied quietly. "I'm sorry. I lost my temper."

"I understand why you did it," Adderstar meowed. "And I'm glad your actions and words come from your heart. But you still must be punished. And I'll have some warriors fill in that hole near the elders' den, so no more sneaking out!"

Rosepaw nodded. "Yes, Adderstar."

"Your mentor will decide your punishment. I'm sure he'll be fair enough." The leader flicked his tail. "You're both dismissed. Thank you for the report, Pineclaw; I'll make certain I mention that border skirmish at the next Gathering."

Rosepaw followed her mentor out of the den, feeling rather calm despite the whirlwind of a day she'd had. *I've done a lot of stupid things today, but at least I've done a bit of good too.*

"I'll task you with taking care of the elders every day until the next Gathering," Pineclaw mewed. "It's in a couple of days, but you won't be going, as you probably expected."

"I did expect it."

"You can go ahead and get started with your jobs today," Pineclaw ordered. "Fresh moss, food, ticks and fleas, everything. Once you're done, you'll be allowed to pick from the fresh-kill pile."

"Understood." Rosepaw didn't want to be anything other than an obedient apprentice. She'd crossed enough boundaries already today.

Pineclaw blinked at her, then meowed, "I'm still proud of you, you know. You fought like a true warrior against that fox. And—even if it was out of turn—you spoke fearlessly to cats from another Clan. I know you'll make a fantastic warrior."

"And I'll owe it all to my fantastic mentor."

Rosepaw met her mentor's light amber gaze happily. She couldn't help herself; something about Pineclaw's praise always gave her fresh joy and confidence. It made her feel like she was floating.

Pineclaw purred, obviously pleased. "Get on with your chores," he laughed. "Ashwhisker will be waiting for you!"

"Anything but Ashwhisker!" Rosepaw found herself purring too. She was faintly surprised when Pineclaw licked each of her ears once, and was still purring when he padded away. *I'm so glad he's still happy with me.*

She sighed with relief, and began trotting over to the elder den. Nightpaw intercepted her; he had been crouched outside the apprentice den.

"How's your shoulder holding up?" he asked, sounding hesitant. "And that bite on your leg looks a bit deep. Should you—"

Rosepaw twitched her whiskers with a hint of exasperation, and her friend fell silent. "I'm fine, honestly," she mewed. "The bite doesn't hurt, and my shoulder didn't even start bleeding during the fight with the fox. I'll let Grayleaf check over me when I'm done with the elders."

"Yeah, um...about that." Nightpaw shuffled his paws. "You didn't have to do what you did for me back there. Part of this was my fault too, and I should take some of the—"

"No, you shouldn't. And as far as everyone else is concerned now, you had nothing to do with the kits sneaking out." Rosepaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Let's try and keep it that way, so I don't get in trouble for *more* lying!"

"Right." Nightpaw relaxed visibly, clearly glad that his friend wasn't

angry at him. "And let's not go out at night anymore either. Adderstar will probably have some warriors cover up the tunnel anyways."

"Yeah, he told me he was," Rosepaw replied. Changing the subject, she added, "I'm not going to the Gathering, but I can't say I'm upset about it. I have a feeling the truce will be broken."

Nightpaw's ears pricked. "Why?"

"There was a patrol, at the FireClan border, that didn't stop to help the kits when they noticed the fox about to pounce on them. But they think *we're* the ones breaking the warrior code."

"The cowards!" Nightpaw hissed.

"Adderstar said he'll be announcing it at the Gathering."

"Now I see what you mean. There's bound to be fighting between SunClan and FireClan. But surely MoonClan and WaterClan will side with us? I mean, it's pretty clear that *FireClan* broke the code, not us."

"If they're honorable warriors, they will side with us," Rosepaw insisted. "Either way, I'll be looking out for clouds covering the full moon."

"And if I get to go, I'll tell you everything you want to know about it," Nightpaw promised. "But for now you'd better get started on those chores before I get you in more trouble."

"Right. See you later," Rosepaw mewed, continuing on her way to the elders' den. But the thought of the upcoming confrontation between SunClan and FireClan stuck in her mind for the rest of the day.

We already have rogues invading our territory, and they won't be leaving anytime soon. Leaf-bare is closing in on the forest. Can we really handle a rivalry with another Clan, too?

Chapter 20

"Dawnpaw, are you done checking over those oak leaves yet? The Gathering patrol is about to leave."

"Just a moment, Grayleaf." Dawnpaw gave the pile one last sniff, and then pawed them into a store hole. She and Grayleaf had gone herb gathering that morning, and had picked up some oak leaves along the way. After letting them dry in the sun, Dawnpaw was tasked with making sure none of the leaves had been damaged from sun exposure.

If you didn't want me to be left behind, then you should have given me the job sooner!

Hurriedly Dawnpaw finished scraping the leaves away, and headed out of the medicine den. Grayleaf was waiting impatiently for her by the entrance.

As the two medicine cats padded over to join the Gathering patrol, Dawnpaw caught her sister's eye. It had been three days since Rainfoot's kits had gone missing, brought back by Rosepaw and her patrol. But at the same time, the Clan had learned that it was actually Rosepaw's fault that the kits had been tempted to sneak out in the first place.

Dawnpaw felt a pang of sympathy for her littermate. Then she pushed it away briskly. Rosepaw hadn't even told her about her nights out of camp all by herself. *If something had killed her, I wouldn't have even known about it!* Plus, on the morning the kits had gone missing, she had been strangely rude and upset, taking out her frustrations on Dawnpaw.

Dawnpaw quickly broke eye contact with Rosepaw. *What did I ever do to her? She had no reason to be so harsh to me. And I can't believe she never said anything to me about the tunnel by the elders' den!* It was an effort for her to keep her fur flat. She didn't want the Gathering patrol questioning why she seemed so riled up.

Adderstar rose briskly to his paws when every chosen cat had assembled. He lashed his tail, whisking around to race out of camp. "Let's go. This Gathering is bound to be an eventful one."

Threatening growls rose up from the patrol, making Dawnpaw feel anxious. *What's going to happen when Adderstar announces that FireClan broke the warrior code?*

Patchflower and Quickstorm—both chosen for the Gathering—flanked her.

"I wouldn't mingle with any cats from other Clans tonight," Quickstorm warned.

"Especially FireClan," Patchflower added. "Stay close to Grayleaf, and be alert. I don't want you getting hurt if a fight breaks out."

"There won't be a fight!" Dawnpaw gasped. "The Clans wouldn't dare break StarClan's truce!"

She waited for her parents to agree, but their eyes only darkened grimly.

"FireClan broke the code once," Quickstorm sighed. "They might do it again."

Nightpaw, who walked a few paces ahead of them, fell back with his ears pricked. "If a fight between our Clans *does* break out, what do we do?" he asked worriedly. "Do we flee? Fight back? If we fought back, won't StarClan be angry with us, too?"

Those are good questions, Dawnpaw thought.

"We'll do what we must to defend ourselves," Patchflower meowed. "StarClan cannot be angry at us for that."

I hope so. Despair clawed at Dawnpaw. *The last thing we need is a war with another Clan right before leaf-bare!*

"I'm glad Adderstar will be mentioning what FireClan did," Minnowtail chirped up ahead. She was talking to Forestfire. "They deserve to be shamed in front of the other Clans for breaking such a

valuable part of the warrior code."

"I completely agree!" Forestfire mewed. "Those fox-hearts need to answer for what they've done." She scoffed. "As if they could even justify leaving four kits to be eaten by a fox. I'd like to see them try that!"

"I'll rip their pelts off if they even try to!" Dawnpaw noticed that Minnowtail's claws caught the faint moonlight and glinted menacingly.

"You will do no such thing," Adderstar growled, glancing fiercely over his shoulder at the feisty warrior. "We will try and resolve this as civilly as possible. I'm sure Amberstar will have something to say about what happened, and we will listen to her *without* engaging in any fights. Understood?"

"Sorry, Adderstar," Minnowtail mumbled. "Understood."

"Good. Now let's keep going; we don't want to be late." Adderstar turned and kept heading in the direction of the Moontree clearing.

Dawnpaw noticed that Minnowtail's fur was still fluffed up, her claws still unsheathed. She felt a current of fear running through her. *How can we keep the peace when some warriors only want to fight?* she wondered desperately. Then she thought of something even more chilling: *Does my dream have anything to do with this? Oh, StarClan, no...*

Her first StarClan message had come true soon after she received it; Violetsky had warned her that Rainfoot's kits would be in grave danger. They were later almost eaten by a fox.

If that message came true so soon, will the prophecy I received come true just as quickly? Is it coming true tonight? Dawnpaw felt confusion overwhelming her, and she pressed against Patchflower as she walked, taking comfort in her soft, warm fur.

She decided that she needed to stop overthinking everything. She would focus on the here and now, and serve her Clan to the best of her abilities when they needed her to. She was certain she would

know instinctively when the prophecy was coming true.

The familiar, moonwashed circle of bushes lined up at the center of all four territories. The SunClan patrol pushed their way through. Dawnpaw was glad to see that hers was the second Clan to arrive; the first had been MoonClan.

She bounded up to Grayleaf and, ignoring the friendly greetings that SunClan and MoonClan exchanged, padded over to the place where the medicine cats sat. Leafstripe was already there, waving her tail in greeting. "How's the prey been running?"

"Quite well." Grayleaf settled beside Leafstripe with her paws tucked beneath her chest. "I just hope the Clan fattens up in time for leaf-bare."

"Every medicine cat is worried about that," Leafstripe agreed. "But we make it through every leaf-bare, so I'm sure this one will be no different."

"Oh, but it might be," Grayleaf muttered darkly. "For SunClan and FireClan."

Leafstripe's ears pricked with worried curiosity. *Here it comes,* Dawnpaw thought.

Grayleaf swept on. "A few sunrises ago, Rainfoot's kits went missing."

"All four of them?" Leafstripe gasped.

"All four of them," Grayleaf repeated. "We found them beside the FireClan border being stalked by a fox."

"Great StarClan!" Leafstripe's fur bristled with horror. "They're all okay, right?"

"Yes, they're all fine, thank goodness," Grayleaf reported.

"Oh, good. But what does FireClan have to do with any of this? Besides the fact that the kits were found at their border."

"There was a FireClan patrol that watched the entire fight unfold. They were even watching while the kits were being *stalked*. Didn't lift one paw to help."

Leafstripe's eyes darkened. Dawnpaw shivered.

"After the fox had been driven away, the FireClan cats revealed themselves and mocked us. Told us that we should teach our kits to follow the warrior code and stay in camp like they should."

Leafstripe's eyes narrowed. "You're kidding."

Grayleaf shook her head grimly. "An act as bold as this is bound to cause trouble for both Clans. And a war right at the start of leaf-bare is exactly what we don't need."

"I pray for both Clans," Leafstripe murmured. "I pray you can resolve this peacefully, so that no much-needed blood will be shed."

"That is what I pray for, too," Grayleaf rasped.

It struck Dawnpaw that she had never seen her mentor this worried or stressed about anything. Despite her blunt, generally brisk attitude, Grayleaf would still do anything to ensure the safety of her Clan. *Just as any good medicine cat should. I'm lucky to have such a great mentor. I should grow up to be half the cat she is.*

The bushes at the other side of the Moontree clearing trembled. The scent of FireClan slammed into Dawnpaw, and her heart began to race. Grayleaf sensed her anxiety, and brushed her thick tail over her spine. Her narrowed eyes stared at the new arrivals, betraying nothing.

Dawnpaw craned her neck and saw Adderstar weaving among his Clanmates one final time, quietly meowing warnings to each cat to keep their mouths shut and claws sheathed. *Now we'll just have to pray that they listen.*

The SunClan leader stalked over to the Moontree and scrambled up to one of the higher branches. Amberstar quickly followed him, settling on the branch directly below him. Both leaders greeted Juniperstar, the MoonClan leader, with friendly tones, but seemed

on edge when greeting each other.

Pineshadow forced his way through the crowd to join the other medicine cats. "Hi," he panted. "I know about the incident with the fox. I'm so sorry! My Clanmates can be so..." He trailed off when he met Grayleaf's eyes; the SunClan medicine cat was calm and friendly, and Dawnpaw sensed that she wasn't feigning her emotions.

"It's all right, Pineshadow," she murmured. "Whatever happens, I know that you're still a medicine cat and none of this is your fault."

Pineshadow sighed with relief. "Thank you, Grayleaf."

Dawnpaw felt a rush of warmth for her mentor for not blaming a cat for something that wasn't his fault.

She turned her attention back to the crowd of warriors and apprentices, tuning out the quiet mewing of the other medicine cats. She noticed immediately that there was a clear rift between SunClan and FireClan, while MoonClan looked on with bemused expressions. Thrushtail had his tail draped protectively over Nightpaw's shoulders. Forestfire was meowing something urgently to Minnowtail, while Patchflower and Quickstorm shared tongues at the side of the group. None of them looked at the FireClan patrol.

She kneaded the ground impatiently. *The longer it takes for WaterClan to arrive,* she thought, *the worse this tension's going to get. We could end up fighting before the Gathering even begins!*

After what seemed like moons had passed, the bushes rustled again, and Troutstar emerged with his sleek-furred Clanmates behind him. Instantly they noticed the hostility between SunClan and FireClan, and exchanged bewildered glances. While Troutstar took his place on a branch near Juniperstar, his cats settled beside MoonClan, who greeted them happily, clearly pleased to have some cats to talk to. Palefeather hurried over to the medicine cats and mewed a quick greeting, before sitting beside Leafstripe.

"I don't like this," Dawnpaw whispered to Grayleaf. "Gatherings aren't meant to be like this. We should be at peace, Clan talking to

Clan."

"I know," Grayleaf responded. "We'll just have to hope that it won't get any worse than this."

"Yeah." Dawnpaw focused on the four leaders in the Moontree as Juniperstar yowled for silence.

"Now that every Clan is present, let this Gathering commence!" she mewed. "I'll start, if you don't mind."

Leafstripe straightened up.

"As you might remember, one of our queens had given birth last moon. I'm happy to report that all the kits are growing well. I have no doubts that they'll be apprentices by the beginning of leaf-bare. Prey is running as well as it usually does before the cold seasons, and we are thriving as well as we can." Juniperstar paused for breath and waved her tail for one of the other leaders to make their report.

Dawnpaw hardly listened while Troutstar spoke. She was thinking about Juniperstar's report, feeling envious. *MoonClan is doing so well, with hardly a care in the world. I wish SunClan was as well as that. But no, we're on the brink of an unnecessary war with another Clan, while rogues are trespassing on one of our borders. Oh, and don't forget this prophecy that I have no clue what it even means!*

She admitted to herself that she should be grateful for the good things that had blessed her Clan. Rainfoot's kits were safe and sound, and growing well; the problem with the rogues wasn't too serious; the Clan had two new warriors; and prey was hardly scarce, giving them the chance to fatten up for the colder seasons.

Dawnpaw was jolted back to the present when Troutstar's voice died away. She lifted her eyes to watch Adderstar. Would he speak first? Or would he allow Amberstar to make her report?

She wondered if it really made any difference. The outcome wouldn't change.

Adderstar rose to his paws, balancing easily on his branch. "SunClan

is doing quite well, too," he began. "We have two new warriors, Minnowtail and Shadowpool, though Shadowpool is not here tonight."

Dawnpaw noticed that MoonClan and WaterClan murmured congratulations, but FireClan deliberately kept their heads down and said nothing. *Could you try a little harder to be hostile?* she thought irritably. *I don't think you're being rude enough!*

"A fox intruded on our territory," Adderstar went on, "but a patrol bravely chased it off of our territory. It won't come back to our territory in a rush, that's for certain."

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but he was interrupted by Amberstar, who was clearing her throat. Dawnpaw's ears pricked. *What do you have to say?*

"That's all well and good, Adderstar. But let us not forget why you even discovered the fox in the first place. You were looking for four lost kits, and they were being stalked by that fox."

The FireClan leader's ember-like gaze burned over the cats in the clearing below her. "SunClan is so unorganized that they let four little kits disappear right from under their paws! They could have died!"

Gasps of astonishment rippled through the clearing. Dawnpaw noted that most of the voices were sympathetic rather than taunting.

"Those poor kits! I hope they're all right."

"They must have learned a lesson they won't soon forget!"

Amberstar's eyes hardened. She seemed determined to use this as an opportunity to insult SunClan. She raised her head to look up at Adderstar.

"I should think that such a *noble* and *righteous* Clan would know how to obey the simplest parts of the warrior code, but clearly I am mistaken."

The SunClan cats were all flattened ears and enraged hisses. *Clearly Adderstar's warnings went in one ear and out the other,* Dawnpaw thought. *What happens if one of them loses their temper?*

To her surprise, Adderstar hardly seemed bothered. His eyes were calm but frosty, and his chin was lifted high. "Yes, those kits did go missing," he replied smoothly. "And they are all safe. We cannot forget that. But, Amberstar, let us also not forget the reason that you know about this course of events, hmm?"

The whispers in the clearing died down, and ears pricked with curiosity. Dawnpaw pressed closer to Grayleaf. *Here it comes...*

Adderstar's voice was clear and steady as he meowed, "A patrol of three FireClan warriors was at the border when they noticed four SunClan kits wandering at the border. Then a fox emerged, obviously stalking the kits, and ready for an easy meal. These warriors merely stood at the border and watched. They never lifted one claw to help, even when our patrol discovered the fox and the fight began."

The clearing was now utterly silent. FireClan was bristling. Amberstar's eyes were black with fury. SunClan's heads were raised with indignation. The other two Clans were exchanging shocked glances.

"Both sides of the story have been told," Pineshadow murmured. "I just hope the truce isn't broken over it all."

"Amberstar accuses us of straying from the warrior code," Adderstar growled, his eyes flashing down at FireClan's leader. "But the actions of her warriors make me question whether she has the right to call *us* the code breakers."

One FireClan cat, a tortoiseshell she-cat, sprang to her paws. "It isn't our fault your kits have bees in their brains!" she snarled, challenging Adderstar directly. "It's your problem, and we aren't about to be accused of meddling in your affairs."

Several other cats yowled their agreement.

"SunClan should deal with their own problems!"

"You can't expect us to help you when it was your fault to begin with!"

"The warrior code tells us not to trespass on another Clan's territory!" Amberstar hissed. "How dare you tell us we are in the wrong when we were doing exactly what we were supposed to?"

"The warrior code also tells us never to neglect a kit in pain or trouble, even if it's from another Clan!" Adderstar retorted. "I don't believe you would have a clear conscience if your warriors had stood there and watched four helpless kits be slaughtered by a fox."

SunClan raised their voices in support, caterwauling defiantly.

"Fox-hearted rogues!"

"How can you call yourselves a Clan?"

"You would have watched innocent kits die!"

"StarClan can't even look at you!"

Dawnpaw winced at the harsh insults that were tossed from Clan to Clan like fresh-kill. She watched in horror as Minnowtail and Forestfire whipped around to face two FireClan warriors; all four cats had their claws unsheathed. Thrushtail thrust himself in front of Nightpaw, glaring at any FireClan cats that met his gaze. Quickstorm and Patchflower stood beside each other, their tails lashing with anger and eyes dark with concern. MoonClan and WaterClan backed away to the other edge of the clearing, obviously wanting no part in the conflict.

Some cat has to stop this! Dawnpaw looked up at Adderstar with desperation, hoping he could calm his warriors down. But the SunClan leader gazed furiously down at Amberstar, who met his gaze without flinching. Both cats looked as if they would spring at the other for a mouse-tail. *Oh, no. Even Adderstar has lost his temper.*

There was no doubt about it now. The Gathering was moments away from exploding into a full-scale battle.

Chapter 21

"Put your claws away! StarClan does not want this!"

One screech sounded above all of the commotion. The entire clearing silenced in a few moments, and every gaze turned to where the medicine cats were sitting.

It took Dawnpaw several heartbeats before she registered the voice as her own.

She was trembling, but found that her voice was clear and icy as she continued. "At this point it doesn't matter who broke the code that day. You are all about to break the code right now! It is not StarClan's will for blood to be spilled at a Gathering, and it never has been. But all of you are so consumed with your own anger and indignation, that you fail to see the problem that is right in front of your noses!"

Dawnpaw felt confidence surging through her veins when she realized that she had caught every cat's attention. Even the leaders were watching her with unconcealed interest. She found that her words came as easily as if they were instinctive.

"Leaf-bare is only a couple moons away, and yet all you can think about is war with another Clan! This is the time when peace is needed the *most* between the Clans. We should be focusing on preparing ourselves for the cold seasons to come, instead of preparing insults and challenges to throw carelessly at each other. If you keep on like this, so many cats will be injured that there won't be enough warriors for hunting! We'll all starve to death!"

Dawnpaw paused for a quick breath, and then finished briskly, "Sheathe your claws and shut your mouths. StarClan would not want conflict at a Gathering, and the four living Clans should not want to starve while fighting pointless battles."

She was acutely aware of every cat's shock, flowing over her in

waves. *They probably didn't expect an apprentice to address a Gathering like they were a bunch of newborn kits. I'm as surprised as they are.*

As if reading her thoughts, some cat hissed, "You're only an apprentice. What gives you the right to speak to us like that?"

Dawnpaw managed to pinpoint the cat who had spoken—a white-and-brown tom that sat among FireClan—and met his eyes boldly, without flinching.

"I'm a medicine cat. My loyalties stretch beyond Clan boundaries, and StarClan speak through me. If I believe that the code they have laid down for warriors is being challenged, I rise to the challenge. And if I believe that the health of my Clan is being threatened, then I do everything I can to make sure they are protected and safe. If that means stopping a battle from breaking out at a Gathering, then so be it."

The cat who had spoken up ducked his head with embarrassment and did not respond.

Dawnpaw took a deep breath to keep herself steady and scanned the crowd. *I stopped the fight, thank StarClan...but what happens now? My fur is itching from all these cats staring at me.*

She felt a brief surge of gratitude as Grayleaf padded up to stand beside her. "What Dawnpaw says is true and reasonable," she rasped. "We must not fight among ourselves while greater problems are arising."

"Yes, keep the peace!" Pineshadow pleaded.

"Keep the peace!" Leafstripe and Palefeather joined in.

"The medicine cats have spoken," Adderstar called. "Will we respect their judgement?" His eyes flicked between SunClan and FireClan, addressing them as a whole.

One by one, every cat nodded reluctantly. Dawnpaw realized she was holding her breath, and released it with a sigh of pure relief. *I can hardly believe what we just did!* Pride coursed through her as she

added to herself, *I can hardly believe what* I *just did.*

Only Amberstar still looked furious, although her anger was carefully contained. "I will not make a report," she growled. "This Gathering is over."

With that, she leaped gracefully down from the Moontree and quickly rounded up her cats. With a last livid glare at the SunClan patrol, she disappeared into the undergrowth with them following behind her.

Dawnpaw realized that Leafstripe was watching her with undisguised admiration. "What you have done will not soon be forgotten by any of the Clans," the pretty tabby purred. "You might not be my apprentice, but I am proud of you nonetheless."

"Yes," Palefeather agreed, nodding at Dawnpaw. "That speech came directly from your heart, I could tell."

"I thank you most of all," Pineshadow mewed. "You might have just stopped my Clan from rushing into an unnecessary battle."

Dawnpaw was beginning to feel embarrassed by all the praise she was receiving. "I was only doing what any medicine cat would've done. If I hadn't spoken, one of you would have."

"That might be true." Grayleaf licked her apprentice's ear fondly. "But it takes courage to address a whole crowd of cats that are much older than you. I'm more proud of you than words can express; you should know that."

"I must hurry and catch up with my patrol," Pineshadow meowed. "I'll see you all at the half-moon meeting." The red tom hurried off in the direction of his own territory.

"We should all join our Clans now," Grayleaf mewed. "Everyone's getting ready to leave."

"Right. Bye now," Palefeather replied.

"Until the meeting," Leafstripe called.

Dawnpaw followed her mentor to where Adderstar was gathering his group to leave. She braced herself for the flood of compliments she was bound to get from her Clanmates. Patchflower and Quickstorm bounded up to her, purring.

"What you just did was amazing!" her mother exclaimed.

"My own daughter just stopped an entire battle from breaking out at a Gathering." Quickstorm rubbed his muzzle along Dawnpaw's cheek. "I'm so proud of you!"

Dawnpaw shied away from her parents. "I did what needed to be done," she mumbled. "Any cat could have done the same thing."

"Still," Adderstar meowed, "it was you who did it. You've done both SunClan and FireClan a service. Let's just hope this 'peace' lasts as long as possible." He nodded at Dawnpaw—she noticed a touch of respect in his eyes—and padded to the head of the patrol. "Let's get back to camp."

As the patrol set off into their own territory, Dawnpaw felt slightly weak with relief. Had this been the disaster that Sunstar had warned her about? Had she just prevented the tragedy? *Oh, thank StarClan!*

As she walked with her tail held high, she caught a bit of conversation between Minnowtail and Forestfire. The two she-cats seemed to be inseparable, especially since they were both chosen for the Gathering. Now they were muttering to each other, so quietly that Dawnpaw had to strain her ears to make out exactly what they were saying.

"...good that the fight was stopped before it was started," Forestfire was whispering. "That could have been bad."

"Sure," Minnowtail growled. "But I'd rather have clawed the arrogant expressions off of each and every one of their mangy faces."

"Tell me about it!" Forestfire snorted ruefully. "I would have attacked Amberstar myself if I'd had the chance. I can't believe that

fox-heart really thinks her Clan is in the right!"

"Maybe it would have been better if we had just settled this with a good fight," Minnowtail muttered. "We could have beaten them easily. Then there would be no more discussion over this, so long as those FireClan cats don't want their pelts lining SunClan nests!"

Dawnpaw realized with dismay that Forestfire was nodding in tense agreement, her claws flexing and tearing the grass as she walked. The ginger-and-white warrior was normally so calm and reasonable. But lately she seemed to have taken on the same aggressive attitude as her silver tabby friend.

Some of these cats would have rather broken the warrior code!

Dawnpaw glanced around, wondering if anyone else had overheard these remarks. Clearly Adderstar hadn't—if he had, then both Minnowtail and Forestfire would have slashed ears by now. She did not see any other cats with their ears pricked toward the two warriors. *I guess nobody else bothered to listen.*

Suddenly a memory flashed through her head. She had been sharing prey with Rosepaw, when the tortoiseshell apprentice had said something about not trusting Minnowpaw. Now Dawnpaw could understand where her sister's suspicions had come from. Even now, as a full warrior, Minnowtail was aggressive and ambitious. And now Forestfire seemed to be adopting that personality. She supposed it might just come from their frustration that FireClan wasn't letting go of their claims, but her gut told her that it was something more. Although trouble had been avoided tonight, it didn't mean that there wouldn't be any problems in the future.

* * *

Now back in the SunClan camp, Dawnpaw headed straight toward the medicine den. She was exhausted after the eventful Gathering. Adderstar had taken his senior warriors aside to discuss what happened, while Minnowtail and Forestfire eagerly told the warriors who hadn't come about it.

She saw Rosepaw leave the elders' den out of the corner of her eye.

Her sister was heading towards her, green eyes glittering with good-humored annoyance.

"I had to fetch mouse bile for the elders' ticks all by myself since you and Grayleaf were gone," she scoffed. "I didn't do too well, and I'm pretty sure I've got more bile on me than I even needed! It's gross!"

"Better wash yourself well in a stream, then, or Nightpaw won't let you sleep in the apprentice den." Dawnpaw kept walking toward her den, intent on sleeping rather than chatting with her sister. *And I wouldn't be surprised if she has one of her weird moodswings again.*

Rosepaw kept following her. "Are you going to tell me what happened at the Gathering?" she prompted. "Everyone in the patrol seemed worked up when they came back. Something must have happened with FireClan, am I right?"

"You can hear all about it from someone else," Dawnpaw snapped. "I'm going to my nest, okay?"

Rosepaw was silent for a moment; then she shrugged, seemingly unbothered by Dawnpaw's sharp tone. "Fine. I don't care if you're in a bad mood—it's not going to soil my good mood. I'll hear about the Gathering from Nightpaw. You get some sleep."

Without waiting for a response, Rosepaw spun around and bounded away, looking for her friend.

The way her sister had responded so nonchalantly almost made Dawnpaw feel guilty for being so curt. Almost. She was too tired and worried to really feel guilty about anything.

Turning back toward the medicine den, she slipped inside and headed for her nest.

She awoke into a dream. She was standing at the top of a steep hill, which sloped all the way down to a sandy shore. Beyond it was a huge, round body of water like nothing Dawnpaw had seen before. The water was smooth and quiet, and bright sunlight glittered on the surface. A soft, pleasant breeze blew through her fur, but the

water did not stir.

Dawnpaw itched to race down the slope and slide to a halt at the shore. She gave in to the urge, and pelted down the hill with a yowl of excitement.

But she lost her footing, one paw twisting beneath her, and staggered. The next thing she knew, she was tumbling rapidly down the hill. *I'll land right in the water!*

Dawnpaw began frantically struggling to get a grip on the rough grass, flailing her paws wildly. But the harder she tried, the more she bumped her shoulders and paws, and her body started aching.

Just when the thought she would keep rolling forever, she slid to a halt, laying on one side with the breath driven out of her. She felt warm sand shifting beneath her, and realized that she had stopped just before the water. *Thank StarClan for that. I don't know how to swim!*

Coughing to catch her breath, Dawnpaw stumbled to her paws. As she looked up, facing the water, a wave of heat crashed over her, and a bright light blazed up in front of her. Confused and terrified, she shrank back, frozen with her claws dug into the sand.

It was then she realized that the water had turned into a bright orange mass of menacing flames that licked relentlessly at the shore. The sand did not burn, but Dawnpaw knew that one touch of it would sear her paws as if it *was* on fire.

"What's happening?" she screeched, desperate for some cat to hear her. "Why is the water on fire?"

"You are not safe yet."

To Dawnpaw's astonishment, a cat emerged from the flames. She was utterly calm in spite of the fire, and her eyes were dark with an unspoken warning.

"Violetsky!" Dawnpaw gasped, recognizing her instantly. "This is a dream from StarClan, isn't it?"

"You are not safe yet," the dark cream she-cat repeated. Her tone was urgent, imploring Dawnpaw to listen. "The battle between SunClan and FireClan has been prevented, but danger still lurks."

"What kind of danger?" Dawnpaw whispered hoarsely. "How are we supposed to face it?"

Violetsky ignored the apprentice's questions. "Sunstar's prophecy still stands. It must be fulfilled!"

In that moment, dozens of faces appeared among the flames, their eyes fixed on Dawnpaw. She couldn't recognize any of them, but she knew they were urging her to heed Violetsky's warnings.

"A terrible tragedy approaches," the former medicine cat whispered. *"Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun."*

"Please, can't you tell me more?" Dawnpaw begged. "What's the point of knowing if there's nothing I can do to stop this?"

"These events are set in stone," Violetsky rasped. "No matter how hard you try, you cannot stop this from happening."

"Then can't you tell me what the prophecy means?" Dawnpaw retorted. "What is the bloodstained flower? How is it going to save us? *What's going to happen to us?*"

"I would tell you if I knew," Violetsky responded sadly. "But only Sunstar knew the true meaning of the prophecy. Now that he is gone, it is not ours to know. We are but his messengers."

"So StarClan can't help us at all?" Dawnpaw gasped. *If they are powerless to help us, then how can we possibly survive?*

"We cannot help you any more than we already have." Violetsky leaned forward, her scent whirling around Dawnpaw. "But I promise that we will stand beside you no matter what happens. SunClan will not face this danger alone. Do you understand, little one?"

"Yes," Dawnpaw breathed. "I understand, Violetsky. Thank you."

As she spoke the words, the world began to fade in front of her—

the hillside, the StarClan cats, and the fire all grew dimmer. The crackling of the blaze became muffled and distant, until it wasn't there at all, and then Dawnpaw was surrounded by an endless darkness.

Chapter 22

Rosepaw's eyes narrowed as she focused eagerly on the mouse, which was scurrying around in a bramble thicket a few tail-lengths away. This would be her first catch of prey since she had been briefly confined to the camp.

The mouse was oblivious to its stalker, and Rosepaw sprang forward. But she misjudged the leap, and landed just short of her prey. The mouse squealed in terror and vanished in a heartbeat. *Mouse dung!*

"Bad luck." Pineclaw slid out from the ferns he had been crouching in. "Your stalking was excellent, but you should have taken a moment to make sure you could leap far enough. You were downwind; the prey wasn't going anywhere."

Rosepaw nodded, slightly embarrassed. "Sorry about that," she mewed. "I guess I'm a bit out of shape with my hunting skills."

Pineclaw purred. "I'm surprised you feel that way, when I caught you stalking leaves in the camp more than once!" he joked.

"I was stir-crazy!" Rosepaw protested good-humoredly. "The elders kept talking about how fun it used to be to hunt, and I couldn't help myself."

"Well, be glad you're back on your regular duties," Pineclaw responded. "You have a bit of catching up to do."

"Right. Should I find some more prey and try again?"

"No, that was only a minor mistake. Right now I want to try something different. We're going to test out your tracking skills."

Rosepaw lashed her tail eagerly. "What am I going to do?"

"I'm going to wander through the forest and leave a scent trail," Pineclaw explained. "You'll wait here for as long as it takes to eat a

mouse, and then start following my trail. The catch is that you have to follow me silently, as if you're tracking an enemy warrior in our territory."

"That gives me an idea," Rosepaw meowed. "Can I try to ambush you? I'd like to freshen up on my battle skills too, if that's okay."

"Well, how's your shoulder?" Pineclaw prompted. "And be honest with me."

"It really doesn't hurt," Rosepaw answered. "Even Grayleaf said it's finally healing well. I'll be okay."

"Okay, then. We'll add an ambush to the session."

"Great! Can we start now?"

"Yep. Remember, wait here."

Pineclaw whipped around and slipped through the ferns, melting into the undergrowth like a shadow. Rosepaw sat down in the center of tiny clearing, idly imagining herself eating a mouse like Pineclaw had suggested.

Her thoughts drifted to what Nightpaw had told her about the Gathering. She remembered how admiring he had sounded when he got to the part where Dawnpaw had addressed the entire Gathering by herself. Rosepaw had felt so proud of her sister, and wanted to tell her so when the Gathering patrol returned. But Dawnpaw was not nearly as cheerful as she had expected, and seemed to be avoiding her on purpose.

Did I do something to offend her again? she wondered anxiously. *Or maybe it's just medicine cat stuff that she can't tell me, and it's worrying her.*

She remembered the looks of quiet fury that Minnowtail and Forestfire in particular had worn when they entered the camp. Nightpaw told her that the two warriors had probably been the most aggressive towards the FireClan cats at the Gathering.

Rosepaw scoffed. *I wouldn't have been surprised if Minnowtail had*

attacked one of them herself. It seems like the exact sort of thing she'd do!

But Forestfire...that was rather confusing to her. She seemed much more calm and controlled than Minnowtail, and had still came a mouse-length from springing at the FireClan group. *Perhaps spending so much time with Minnowtail has changed the way she feels and acts.*

Rosepaw knew deep down that she wasn't being fair; that the two warriors were probably only angry because of how justified FireClan believed they were. But she couldn't shake the suspicions that nagged her, especially suspicions of Minnowtail. There was something she didn't like about the silver she-cat, something she didn't trust. Although she didn't know what, she felt so certain that there would be trouble revolving around Minnowtail in the future.

Shaking her head, Rosepaw decided she had waited long enough. She began creeping forward in the same direction Pineclaw had gone. His scent was already fading, but the faint whiff she caught was fresh and easy to follow. When she lost the scent, she glanced around quickly and saw a bit of crushed undergrowth, signaling Pineclaw had been that way. She turned away from the original trail and followed that instead.

Suddenly she caught another scent, much more rank and all too familiar. Fox! Was Pineclaw in trouble?

But when she raced forward to investigate, she realized it was only a pile of dung, stale and stinky. *Perhaps the fox that found the kits left this behind. Gross!*

Then Rosepaw realized something. Pineclaw's scent trail was completely lost among the disgusting scent of fox dung. He had come through here on purpose, to disguise his trail!

"Clever furball," she muttered to herself. "Now what do I do?"

Rosepaw began wandering around, searching for more trampled ferns or bracken. But Pineclaw definitely wasn't making this part easy for her; he'd taken care not to disturb any undergrowth. *Hmm...what else could be a sign of his trail? I can't see where he went, I*

can't smell where he went...

She jumped at the sound of a thrush's alarm call, and the wild flutter of wings. Something had disturbed the bird; perhaps it was Pineclaw? *I'll head towards where I heard the thrush, and go from there,* she decided.

As she slithered through the forest, her mentor's scent slowly became more apparent, until it smelled like his trail again. *Perfect! I found it again.* Rosepaw quickened her pace, hoping to catch up to Pineclaw before he tricked her again.

She froze at a thick clump of brambles that blocked her path. A tiny hole was opened in the center of the bush, with tufts of dark red fur caught in the thorns. Pineclaw had been through here! Rosepaw quietly sniffed the hole and realized it was remarkably fresh—*he could be right on the other side of these brambles! Maybe he's waiting for me to ambush him, now that I've tracked him across half the territory.*

But before Rosepaw could decide how to go about the ambush, another smell drifted towards her. The Twolegplace...freshly killed squirrel...*that's a rogue! And they're even deeper into our territory than last time!*

The scent of squirrel blood made her hackles rise. She was going to teach this rogue a lesson! *And Pineclaw must be close by; he can help me out. But this only smells like one cat, so it shouldn't be too difficult.*

Rosepaw hurried in the direction of the scent, keeping her paws light to preserve the element of surprise. She burst through a swath of ferns and found herself face-to-face with a surprisingly familiar tabby tom, who gasped with shock.

"You were at the battle!" she hissed. "I remember you. I thought we taught you furballs a lesson."

"I could say the same thing to you," the tom retorted, his eyes narrowing in satisfaction as he glimpsed the scar of the bite he'd left on her shoulder. "But perhaps I wasn't clear enough. Let's go."

Rosepaw sent a quick prayer to StarClan that she could take on this fierce cat single-pawed, at least until Pineclaw arrived to help. The last time she had seen him, Minnowtail had leaped to her rescue. But there was no one here to help her now.

Snarling fiercely, she lunged at the tabby and scored her claws over both of his ears, leaning to the left so she landed lightly beside him. He whipped around and flashed out a claw-spiked paw, catching her on the cheek. Rosepaw hissed and slashed at his nose, earning a spatter of blood from the wound.

She swiped again, but the tabby ducked and dived for her legs. She yowled as the full force of his weight swept her legs out from beneath her. She landed with a heavy *thud* that drove the breath out of her, and the rogue was upon her in an instant.

He's pinned me! Rosepaw struggled fiercely beneath the tom's relentless grip, crying out as he sunk his teeth into her ear. She managed to raise one paw and scrape her claws as deep as she could into his flank. She felt fur and skin tear under her claws and heard the rogue screech in pain, but he only tightened his grip. *I can't get free! Help!*

"Not so strong when your *friends* aren't there to help you, hm?" he sneered. "Don't worry. I'll try and make this quick."

He bared his teeth for a killing bite, eyes fixating on her throat, and Rosepaw felt her heart stop with fear. *I tried, but I just can't move. Is this really it?* she wondered horrifically.

She suddenly became aware of paws thundering over the ground; she could feel them through the earth. The rogue's attention turned away from her.

"Leave her alone, you fox-heart!" Pineclaw screeched. Rosepaw watched as her mentor threw himself at the rogue, knocking him aside with the force of a raging river. *Oh, thank StarClan he came!*

Panting, she scrambled to her paws and briefly checked herself. Deciding she was fine enough, she sprung to Pineclaw's side and helped him to push the rogue tom back into a clump of brambles.

She was aware of how perfectly she and her mentor fought together; the way one seemed to know exactly where the other would land their next blow.

It wasn't long before the rogue yowled with defeat and began stumbling in the direction of the Twolegplace.

"You may have won this time," he snarled, his voice sounding slurred with pain and exhaustion, "but mark my words. Zodiac and her followers will hunt you down and kill you until not one of you is left. We will hunt in this forest as we please without any of you standing in our way."

Rosepaw felt a cold trickle of fear down her spine. Forcing herself to sound threatening, she growled, "Go back to where you came from. Let the wounds you bear be a message to Zodiac that SunClan isn't to be trifled with."

She felt Pineclaw's fur brushing hers lightly, and sensed his approval of her words. The tabby rogue hissed softly, then plunged into the undergrowth.

Pineclaw sighed and turned to her. "Thank StarClan I got here in time," he muttered, pressing his forehead fiercely against hers. "Are you alright?"

"Nothing that won't heal," Rosepaw replied. She felt her fur tingle at the contact. "Thanks. I thought I was crowfood back there."

"How did you come across him?" Pineclaw asked."

"I smelled him while I was tracking you. Maybe he was following your scent trail to see if he could catch you alone." The gravity of Rosepaw's words made her gasp quietly, and she added, "Oh, StarClan, I can't bear the thought of that."

Pineclaw purred comfortingly. "I suppose we saved each other, then. Let's get back to camp and see Grayleaf. I think you've proven that your tracking—and fighting—skills are as sharp as ever."

Rosepaw nodded and set off beside her mentor, her pelt still brushing his. She felt the ends of her fur touch something rough,

and turned to see a nasty scar along Pineclaw's red flank, still trickling blood. "That looks like it hurts pretty badly," she fretted, nodding towards the wound.

Pineclaw gave her a long look, his light amber eyes glowing. "If it means saving your life, then all the wounds in the world are worth it," he meowed.

* * *

"Got into trouble again, eh?" Grayleaf stuck her nose into Rosepaw's fur. "Lucky for you, these wounds aren't too bad. They'll heal much faster than your shoulder."

"What about Pineclaw?" Rosepaw asked. "Will he be okay?"

"Oh, yes, he'll be okay too," Grayleaf answered with a knowing twinkle in her eye. "But you'll have to join someone else for training sessions while he takes it easy for a day or two."

Pineclaw—who lay in his nest in the medicine den a tail-length away—rolled onto his side. "I think you could train with Thrushtail and Nightpaw for now, since he's learning at the same pace you are."

Rosepaw nodded. "All right. Just take it easy like Grayleaf says."

Pineclaw rolled his eyes indignantly. "Who's the mentor here?" he asked with a hint of amusement. "I'm not dying!"

But you could've. Rosepaw forced the sickening thought out of her mind as Dawnpaw emerged from the herb stores.

"I've put away all the marigold and cobwebs you didn't use," the apprentice reported to Grayleaf. She turned to the patients lying in their nests. "How are you two feeling?"

"We're okay," Pineclaw mewed. "Nothing terribly serious."

Rosepaw nodded, unable to speak. She definitely hadn't imagined the hard look her sister gave her, filled with irritation rather than concern. *Is she still mad at me for...whatever I even did to her?* she

thought, bewildered. *Dawnpaw can be such an enigma sometimes!*

"Look after them for a moment, will you?" Grayleaf rasped. "I need to go see if that comfrey I put in Brokenstem's nest is helping with his stiff joints." The dark gray she-cat trotted out of the den.

Rosepaw thought she heard Dawnpaw sigh, but had no time to determine it. "So you say you found a rogue hunting in the forest?" her sister asked.

"We were training, and I scented him nearby, so we taught him a lesson," Rosepaw answered simply.

"These rogues need to realize that we won't let them hunt here," Pineclaw growled. "Until they do, it only causes problems for both groups."

Dawnpaw didn't seem to hear the reddish warrior's remark. Her amber eyes were fixed on Rosepaw.

"You had to attack it all by yourself?" she pressed. "You didn't even go to find Pineclaw before attacking?"

Rosepaw shrugged. "It was only one cat. I handled it well enough until Pineclaw came to help." She shot a glance at her mentor, knowing that wasn't the *full* story but not wanting to tell Dawnpaw that she had almost been killed. That wouldn't exactly help her argument.

Dawnpaw's eyes narrowed with a surprising fury. "You don't understand, do you?" she hissed. "You have no idea what I'm really talking about."

Rosepaw blinked. "Er...I guess I don't?"

"You're not being careful at all!" Dawnpaw snapped, digging her claws into the ground. "The last time you were in here, you had a wound that almost killed you. And now you're here again, with *more* injuries. You're lucky this time Pineclaw didn't have to drag you back to the camp!" Her tone grew louder, more desperate, imploring her sister to listen.

"What was I supposed to do?" Rosepaw protested. "Just let the rogue do as he pleased in *SunClan* territory?"

"You could've started by not leaping out at an enemy when there's no one to help you!"

"Every moment we let these cats roam our territory is a moment they think they're gaining power over us. We can't let that happen!"

Dawnpaw was trembling now. "We can't let you die, either."

Rosepaw opened her jaws to reply, then snapped them shut. *How did I not realize? Dawnpaw's only afraid I'll get myself killed like this.*

Quietly she meowed, "I didn't die. I'm still right here, Dawnpaw."

"But you might!" her sister retorted. "Sure, you were lucky this time, but luck can run out. I hate seeing you leave the camp every day, not knowing if you'll come back injured or...or dead."

"Every one of our Clanmates does the same thing," Rosepaw pointed out gently. "Do you worry about them nearly as much?"

Dawnpaw shook her head miserably. "That's different. I know the medicine cat code tells me to think of every cat equally, but...I just can't, no matter how hard I try. They're my Clanmates, and I would do anything to keep them safe...but they're not my kin. I wasn't with them from the moment I came into this world." Her voice shook. "You're my sister, Rosepaw. I can't help but worry about you more than anyone else."

Rosepaw was aware of Pineclaw's eyes boring into her back, as if he was waiting to see how she would respond.

"Do you remember the day I found out you wanted to be a medicine cat?" she murmured at last.

Dawnpaw seemed taken aback by the question. "Y-yes. We were kits back then."

"I told you that life in the forest would always be difficult, no matter what you did."

"I remember."

"I'm a warrior apprentice now. Going out every day and not knowing whether I'll make it back is *part of my life*. If I didn't risk my life every day to serve my Clan, how could I call myself a warrior? You have to understand that."

Dawnpaw's anger returned. "I do understand that! It doesn't make me worry about you any less!"

"I know. But it does mean that I can't stop doing this simply so you don't worry your fur off. I get that you're scared for my life, but it doesn't make me any different from the rest of the warriors. I face just as much danger as they do."

Suddenly Dawnpaw sighed wearily. "I'm not going to keep arguing about this with you," she rasped. "Neither of our minds are changing."

"There was nothing for me to change my mind for in the first place," Rosepaw said simply, resting her chin on her paw.

She glanced at Pineclaw and caught his eye. He gazed at her sympathetically, and she blinked back before closing her eyes to sleep.

What would the Clan be like if she was killed? How would it affect Pineclaw, her mother and father, her sister? Nightpaw? How would the whole *Clan* react? Rosepaw shuddered just thinking about all of it. This argument with Dawnpaw made her question for the first time what would happen if she left the camp one day and didn't return alive.

Chapter 23

"So the squirrel makes this huge leap into the branches of the next tree. It was three fox-lengths, at least."

Rosepaw nodded, murmuring for Brokenstem to continue as she parted his fur with her paws, looking for ticks. He was the last elder left before she was done with tick duty, which she had been given so she had something to do while she was injured. *But this isn't what I imagined doing when I asked Grayleaf to give me something to do,* she groaned inwardly, feeling sick as she smelled the moss dipped in mouse bile.

"Cherryfur had only been an apprentice for less than two moons," the elder went on. "She was only just beginning to learn how to climb trees. Nonetheless, this mouse-brained cat decided to follow the squirrel and jump to the next tree too."

"Seriously?" Rosepaw gasped. "I wouldn't dare do that! Did she fall?"

"She actually didn't," Brokenstem snorted, his eyes clouded with the memory. "She landed perfectly and caught the squirrel before it could get away again. I'd never seen a cat so young pull off something like that—I'd bet it was because she had been out practicing on her own to prove herself!"

"She must have been very proud of that catch," Rosepaw commented.

"Oh, she was," Brokenstem purred. "All the other apprentices shared the squirrel with her. They treated her like a hero—let her have the first bite and everything."

Rosepaw laughed. "Sounds fun." She was mildly surprised that the tabby elder didn't seem to have any ticks. "You were right. I'm not seeing any ticks."

"Thanks for checking anyways," Brokenstem responded. "Now off

you go, youngster. I hope your wounds heal well!"

After mewing quick farewells to the three elders, Rosepaw padded out of their den, narrowing her eyes against the late afternoon sunshine.

Most of the Clan was gathered cheerfully around the fresh-kill pile to pick their meals. She noticed several cats huddling together for warmth as they waited for their turns; her own fur was fluffed up against the chill. Above her, the leaves on many of the trees were turning pretty shades of red and ginger, and some were already drifting lazily to the ground.

The forest must look so beautiful when leaf-fall starts, she mused. Her eyes were drawn to Beestripe, who was organizing a sunset border patrol. *Maybe I should try and get on the border patrol so I can see it all.*

She bounded toward the deputy. "Hi," she mewed. "Is it okay if I join the patrol, please?"

Beestripe blinked, silent for a moment, then nodded. "Sure. Pineclaw will come too, then."

Rosepaw noticed her mentor sitting nearby, and padded over to join him while they waited for the rest of the patrol to be chosen.

He briefly touched his nose to her ear. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot better," she answered. "My new scratches barely hurt, and the fur on my shoulder is growing back. You can barely see the wound now." She looked at Pineclaw's flank, where his biggest wound was. "How does that feel?" She remembered what he had said to her the last time she mentioned the injury. *If it means saving your life, then all the wounds in the world are worth it.* Her pelt still tingled with pleasure at the thought.

"Sore," Pineclaw admitted, "but better than before. Grayleaf said I was fit to go back to warrior duties, but not battle training unless some other cat does the demonstrations."

"At least it's healing, and not infected," Rosepaw meowed. Feeling

bold, she added, "I wouldn't want to have any other cat as my mentor."

Pineclaw blinked warmly at her, purring softly. She returned the gesture happily, noticing a few other nearby cats gazing at them with mild amusement. *They must think it's obvious that we like each other. And it probably is!*

"Right then," Beestripe meowed, jolting her out of her thoughts. "Birchpelt is leading the patrol, with Pineclaw, Rosepaw, Ebonypelt, Shadowpool, and Robinfeather."

Birchpelt lifted his chin, seemingly proud of being the leader of a patrol with a senior warrior in it. *He has a lot of things to be proud of,* Rosepaw realized, seeing him flash a quick glance toward the nursery. She could see four pairs of tiny eyes glowing in the darkness, watching the life of the Clan with quiet curiosity.

I wonder if Pineclaw and I will ever have kits like that?

Rosepaw wasn't ashamed of the thought, but she didn't dare to ask the handsome red warrior about it. *I'm not even a warrior yet!*

She and her mentor took up the rear as the patrol set off, her fur comfortably touching his. She cast one more glance over her shoulder and noticed Nightpaw watching her. His round ice-blue eyes were unreadable. When their eyes met, the black tom rose to his paws and stalked inside the apprentice den.

Rosepaw turned away, confused. *Is he mad at me? What for?* She stifled an eye roll. *Why are so many cats irritated with me for some unexplained reason?*

Wanting to hold on to her good mood, she commented to Pineclaw, "I'm excited to see what the forest looks like right now. I bet it's so pretty right now, with all the red and orange leaves falling from the trees, and the sunset making them glow..."

She glanced sideways; Pineclaw was watching her with amusement. "You have an entire image built up in your head for this, don't you?"

Rosepaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "I just hope I'm not

disappointed."

"I don't think you will be," Pineclaw remarked. "For all the cold weather and scarce prey, leaf-fall and leaf-bare can have their stunning moments."

"I can't even imagine what snow looks like." Rosepaw screwed up her nose. "How could tiny white flakes cover the entire forest?"

"You haven't seen how many fall all at once!" Pineclaw purred. "There are so many, it could make Nightpaw's fur look as white as a full moon."

Up ahead, Birchpelt meowed, "We'll check the FireClan border first and make sure they aren't causing any more trouble."

The forest was silhouetted and mysterious; the sunset glowed intensely through the trees, turning their outlines black. The grass felt soft and cool underpaw. Higher up, the leaves glowed just as Rosepaw had imagined that would—she was captivated by the beauty. *I wouldn't ever want to live anywhere else,* she thought, sighing contentedly. She was perfectly content to walk along this familiar trail with her patrol, enjoying the peaceful scenery with Pineclaw at her side.

If only it was always this easy to just forget about anything that's worrying me, she thought, relishing the relaxed state she was in. *Out here, it's almost like the rogues, problems with other Clans, arguments—those strange dreams I've been having—just don't exist.*

When the patrol reached the FireClan border, all was clear. Pineclaw let her set a couple of the scent markers, leaving her feeling a little proud of herself. Birchpelt meowed that the MoonClan border was next; then they'd check the Twolegplace thoroughly for any sign of rogue intrusion. *We'll probably be back in camp before moonhigh.*

The forest grew steadily darker, and Rosepaw found herself watching the ground carefully as she kept tripping on twigs or bramble tendrils. She recalled how long it had been since she had last been out of the camp at night. *Those days of sneaking out with*

Nightpaw are over, that's for sure!

Pineclaw suddenly yelped, his body lurching forward. Rosepaw blinked in alarm as the patrol stopped to turn around. "What happened?" she asked.

"I stepped in a hole," Pineclaw muttered, tugging his paw out of a tiny, shadowy opening in the earth. "Some leaves were covering it and I didn't see it."

Stifling a *mrrow* of amusement, Rosepaw commented, "One of those leaves is stuck to your pelt."

Her mentor shook himself, dislodging the leaf, and she added, "It was the same color as your pelt—it looked like a piece of fur just flew off of you!"

Pineclaw cuffed her over the ear. "Silly furball. Anyway, my paw is fine."

"Then let's keep going," Birchpelt mewed wryly. He flicked his tail for the patrol to continue on.

Pineclaw leaned over and meowed in her ear, "While we're out here, let's test your scenting and hearing skills. When you can't see anything in the forest, you have to rely mostly on your ears and nose to guide you around. Tell me what you can smell. And can you hear anything unusual?"

Rosepaw lifted her head high, concentrating hard. "Hmm...that tree over there—" she angled her ears in that direction, "—smells strongly of mouse. Maybe there's a mousehole in the roots. And I can hear squirrels moving about near that cluster of oaks," she added. "They must be gathering nuts to store for leaf-bare."

"Very good," Pineclaw praised her. "Anything else? Try looking for scents other than that of prey this time."

"Okay." Rosepaw sniffed until her nose burned with the cold air. "A patrol came by here some time today. It's quite stale...I think it came from around sunhigh. And I can smell fox scent too, but that's even older than the patrol's scent. Maybe this is near where

Hazelfrost was herding that fox out of our territory."

She glanced up and noticed Ebonypelt watching her, pale blue eyes glimmering with approval. "Your apprentice has a very sharp nose, even in this chilly weather," she meowed to Pineclaw. "She's shaping up to be a fine warrior."

Rosepaw swelled with pride, puffing out her chest. *Ebonypelt's a senior warrior! It's not every day you get praise from someone like her.*

Pineclaw looked thoroughly pleased as well. He gave her a warm glance and responded, "I agree. I'm glad Adderstar made me her mentor."

If I get any happier, I might burst! Rosepaw felt light as air as the border patrol came closer to the MoonClan boundary.

Birchpelt turned to face the rest of them. "Okay. Shadowpool, Pineclaw, and Rosepaw, you go to the left and set the markers along that side. I'll go with Ebonypelt and Robinfeather and set the markers on the right side."

Rosepaw flanked Pineclaw with Shadowpool, and they began renewing the scent markers and checking to make sure the MoonClan scent line was where it should be.

Watching Shadowpool with his calm demeanor and serious attitude, Rosepaw wondered how he could be so different from his sister. While Minnowtail seemed to love rushing straight into things, he liked to carefully think things through first. Minnowtail enjoyed fighting; he would rather do something more peaceful.

Maybe he has similar suspicions about his sister that I do? Rosepaw thought. *I could ask him...no, Shadowpool would think I'm just paranoid. He'd never think of his own sister that way.*

While she was still debating this, a strongly familiar scent caught her attention. She blinked in disbelief, wondering if this was just a coincidence. But when she realized how wide-spread the scent was, Rosepaw knew there was something else going on.

Why is Minnowtail's scent completely *covering the border here?*

She cast a glance over at Shadowpool, and saw that he too had noticed. His tail was stiff and his eyes were sharp with confusion. He caught Rosepaw's eye and suddenly blinked in panic. "Please don't say anything," he begged.
"Just wait a moment."

"What's going on here?" Rosepaw hissed. "Do you know anything about this?" *It smells like Minnowtail was crossing the border; that's how strong it is! How can I not say anything about it?*

Shadowpool shook his head rapidly. "I swear, I don't! But Minnowtail shouldn't get in trouble until we know what she's up to."

Rosepaw looked reluctantly at the dark warrior, then over at Pineclaw. She sighed. *I guess what he says is reasonable.*

"All right, I won't say a word," she promised. "But we need to hide her scent somehow. And we can look further into this tomorrow, by ourselves."

"Okay," Shadowpool replied anxiously. "Thank you, Rosepaw."

"Let's hurry up before Pineclaw wonders what we're doing!" Rosepaw glanced hurriedly around and spotted a clump of tall, strong-smelling yellow flowers. *Those will work perfectly.*

She bounded over and nipped off several stems. "We can rub these around the area to mask the smell," she mumbled to Shadowpool.

"Okay," he hissed. "Quick!"

He took some of the flowers from her and began smothering the ground with them. *I hope this will do,* Rosepaw thought as she joined him.

Just as they finished, Pineclaw yowled, "Are you two done yet?"

"Yes, we're coming," Shadowpool called back. In a lower voice he added, "This is good enough. Let's go."

Rosepaw nodded tensely and followed him back to where Pineclaw

and the rest of the border patrol was waiting. As they set off toward the Twolegplace, she found herself wondering what in StarClan's name she had just gotten herself into.

Chapter 24

Rosepaw slithered as quietly as she could over to the warrior den. It was the day after she and Shadowpool had gone on the border patrol, and the sun hadn't risen in the sky yet. No cat but her—and Harefoot, who was on guard duty at the camp entrance—was awake yet. This was good; no cat needed to see what she was about to do.

Her fur bristled with anxiety as she pressed herself against the outer wall of the den. She lowered the thick twig she was carrying in her mouth to the ground, taking it in her paws.

Let's make this quick.

Suppressing a grunt of effort, Rosepaw heaved the stick up between her forepaws and jammed it into the side of the den. The leaves and bramble tendrils crunched loudly, and a jagged hole opened up in the wall. Trembling, Rosepaw scurried away, back into the apprentices' den. She curled up in her nest beside Nightpaw's sleeping shape, and took several deep breaths to calm herself.

I hope Adderstar will have the younger warriors fix that hole in the wall. Pineclaw is one of them, and that means Shadowpool and I will have a perfect opportunity to slip away and investigate the Minnowtail situation.

As she steadily drifted back into sleep, Rosepaw's belly felt hollow with guilt. She just hoped that whatever she and Shadowpool found would be worth all the trouble she had caused.

* * *

"Great StarClan, where did *that* come from?"

Rosepaw's eyes snapped open when she heard Patchflower's gasp. She pricked her ears.

"Where did what come from?" Quickstorm mumbled drowsily.

"This huge opening in the den wall," Patchflower responded. "If it was raining, we'd all be half-drowned!"

"I see what you mean." Shinefur's voice joined the conversation. "That hole is as big as a full-grown kit!"

Then Minnowtail added, "It looks like that big stick caused the wall to rip. But how could it have done that with such force?"

Rosepaw found herself holding her breath as Willowstripe mewed, "If there was any strong wind last night, we would've noticed for sure. You're right, Minnowtail. It is a bit strange."

Oh, StarClan. Doubts about her plan began to race through Rosepaw's head. Sure, Adderstar would probably have the younger warriors handle the repair, but what if Shadowpool was one of them? Or what if her scent was still lingering where she had punctured the den wall? They would suspect she had something to do with it. *How could I talk my way out of that?*

She closed her eyes again. *I'll just have to hope this works. I'm doing this for the Clan,* she reassured herself. *If Minnowtail turns out to be a traitor helping MoonClan, then everything I'm doing will be worth it.*

With that thought passing over her, Rosepaw guiltily found herself praying that the silver tabby warrior *had* done something terrible. Just so that she didn't have to get in trouble for all of this.

I really am a terrible apprentice!

"I'm going to see if Adderstar is awake." Beestripe's voice reached her ears from the warriors' den. "I'll tell him about the hole and organize a group to patch it up."

"Good," Birchpelt grunted. "Maybe then I can sleep without all of you chirping like birds around me!"

"Oh, be quiet, you dormouse!" Minnowtail purred. "You're just tired because your kits are keeping you on your toes."

"You try being a parent to four kits at once!" Birchpelt retorted good-humoredly.

It doesn't sound like they'll investigate how *the hole got there.* Relieved of some of her anxiety, Rosepaw got to her paws and stretched luxuriously. "It's morning," she mewed to Nightpaw, who stirred beside her and grunted. She padded out of the den.

Narrowing her eyes against the brightness, she could just see the top of the sun slipping up over the trees. Beestripe was ducking inside the Clan leader's den, while several warriors began pouring out of their den. Shadowpool glanced around and caught her eye, and she blinked at him urgently.

Together the two cats padded over to the prey pile, which only had a few scraps left from the previous day's hunting. But Rosepaw's stomach churned with anticipation, and she didn't feel hungry at all.

"You did that, didn't you?" Shadowpool's mew was quiet but knowing. "The hole in the wall of the den."

Rosepaw nodded. "I couldn't think of any other excuse not to have Pineclaw with me today. I just hope it works out like I planned."

"Let's go find Beestripe," Shadowpool meowed tensely. "I don't feel comfortable sitting in the center of the camp and talking about this."

As they padded up to the entrance of the den, the Clan deputy emerged. He spotted Rosepaw and Shadowpool and nodded half to himself.

"Shadowpool, would you mind helping with fixing that hole in the warrior's den? You can find Minnowtail to help you, and...Pineclaw can help too. He was great at patching up walls as an apprentice, so I'm sure he'll be helpful now."

His gaze shifted to Rosepaw. "You can go out with Nightpaw and Thrushtail for today, while Pineclaw is busy."

Shadowpool and Rosepaw nodded, both feigning satisfaction at their orders. But inside Rosepaw was bubbling with frustration, and she imagined her friend felt just the same. *This couldn't have gone*

worse!

"Off you go." Beestripe waved his tail in farewell, then bounded up to the fresh-kill pile. Cats ready for patrol began to crowd around him in a ragged circle.

"Mouse dung!" Rosepaw hissed to Shadowpool. "What now?"

"You'll have to try and do it on your own," the dark gray warrior murmured. "Maybe ask Nightpaw for help. I know we can trust him."

Rosepaw looked away. "He doesn't like when I talk about Minnowtail's rudeness or arrogance," she meowed uncomfortably.

"Well, then *don't* ask for his help." Shadowpool sounded impatient. "Rosepaw, you know how urgent this could be. If my sister ends up a...a traitor, it's best that we find out soon rather than later."

His voice cracked with sorrow as he spoke. Rosepaw realized how hard it must be for him to think that his own littermate might not be loyal to their Clan. *I don't know how I would cope if I found out Dawnpaw was a traitor. She would never do something like that, anyways.*

She licked his ear comfortingly. "I'll see what I can do, all right?" she whispered. "You go and get started on that den. You'll have your work cut out for you—literally."

Shadowpool scoffed with amusement, then trotted away.

Sighing, Rosepaw looked around for Nightpaw, spotting him about to leave the camp with Thrushtail and Thumpstep.

"Pineclaw's busy, and Beestripe said I could join you for whatever you're doing," she mewed as she padded up to them.

Thrushtail nodded, looking thoughtful. "We were going to practice tree climbing and some more advanced battle skills today. But we can throw in send a partner hunting mission to test your skills in that area."

"Awesome! We'll be exhausted by the time we get to our nests," Nightpaw purred to Rosepaw. His eyes shone excitedly.

"Let's get going!" Rosepaw exclaimed. She was eager to start training, too, but more eager that the hunting mission would give her a chance to investigate around the MoonClan border. *And perhaps Nightpaw* will *help me.*

The four cats traveled to the Sun Oak; Thumpstep said it was best for new apprentices to learn how to climb because of its strong, ancient branches. "Just don't try and climb to the very top," he warned. "You aren't SunClan's first leader, and I doubt you'd be able to make it back down safely!"

"We'll be careful," Nightpaw promised. "We already know the basics of tree climbing anyways!"

Thrushtail went first, showing the apprentices how to get the best grip on the bark. He hauled himself up onto a thick branch a couple of fox-lengths up.

"All right, let's see you two do that," he meowed, nodding at Nightpaw to go first. The dark apprentice made it up to the branch with no setbacks, though he was panting when he finally made it up.

Then it was Rosepaw's turn. Wriggling her haunches, she sprang up and dug her claws into the trunk, satisfied that her momentum had given her a firm grip on the tree. *But how do I move when my claws are so deep in the bark?*

"Get moving as quickly as you can before you lose your hold," Thumpstep instructed.

"I'm trying," Rosepaw responded with gritted teeth. She managed to tug one forepaw free and swung it upward. Once she figured out the easiest way to get her claws out of the bark, the rest of the climb was a breeze, and she scrambled up beside Nightpaw and Thrushtail.

"Not had at all for your first try," the warrior mewed. "But make

sure you practice climbing quickly in case of emergency."

Rosepaw nodded. "I'll practice later, maybe with Nightpaw," she replied, glancing swiftly at her friend. He returned her look, and she could tell he was thinking the same thing. *That wasn't my first try!* She thought warmly of the second night she and her best friend had snuck out together. *That was a good night.*

"You three come down, and we can get started on the battle training!" Thumpstep called from below.

"Right," Thrushtail mewed. "Let's go."

The next phase of the training session was in the clearing; Thumpstep began explaining some new partner fighting tactics to the two apprentices. Thrushtail sat off to the side with his tail curled over his paws.

"I'll be your opponent for today, because I'm going to teach you how to use your smaller size to your advantage, when you're up against larger enemies. Like myself."

Rosepaw and Nightpaw purred.

"Now, the first thing to remember is what your strengths and weaknesses are in that kind of situation," Thumpstep meowed. "While your opponent will have the advantage of strength, you have the advantage of speed. Because you're smaller, you'll be able to dart in and out of range of the enemy's claws, dealing damage and not taking as much yourself at the same time."

"Got it," Rosepaw said determinedly. "Show us what to do."

"Oh, I won't be showing you anything just yet," Thumpstep replied. "First, you two will have to figure out what to do on your own. Then I'll tell you how to improve on it."

"Oh. All right!" Nightpaw mewed, kneading the ground with his forepaws. Rosepaw's whiskers twitched with amusement at her friend's eagerness.

"Now, attack me." Thumpstep stood like a huge dark brown

boulder, an unwavering force. *We have to unbalance him somehow,* Rosepaw thought.

She glanced at Nightpaw, who angled his ears toward Thumpstep's big paws. She pointed hers at his back; both apprentices nodded in unison, and then sprang.

Rosepaw sank her claws into the thick fur on Thumpstep's back, careful not to actually hurt him. Once she had a good grip, she began rocking herself back and forth with as much force as she could. Soon she felt Thumpstep's body rocking precariously, and he yowled in surprise.

It's working! Nightpaw's darting in and out of paw's range, and I'm unbalancing Thumpstep from above.

Rosepaw gasped as the massive warrior suddenly stumbled and fell to the side. She leaped clear, just a whisker-length from being crushed. Panting, she spun around and met Nightpaw's icy gaze.

"We did it!" her friend yowled. "Now, let's get him!"

Purring with triumphant amusement, Rosepaw joined her friend in pummeling Thumpstep while he still lay on the ground.

"Alright, that's enough," Thrushtail called. "Let Thumpstep get up now!"

"You two," Thumpstep grunted, "are a force to be reckoned with when you're fighting together. Great job."

"Thanks!" Nightpaw purred. His eyes shone with pride.

"Was there anything we could have done better?" Rosepaw prompted.

Thrushtail padded forward. "I noticed that you weren't really *attacking* Thumpstep in the beginning. You were just focused on unbalancing him, and only started attacking once he was on the ground."

"Yes, I noticed that too," Thumpstep agreed. "Rosepaw, try to use

your teeth to make wounds while your claws keep your grip. And Nightpaw, you can slash and nip at the enemy's paws while you're running around them. That will help with the unbalancing part, too."

"Okay, makes sense," Rosepaw meowed. "Can we try it again?"

"Go right ahead. But this time, I'll be attacking you too!" Thumpstep settled himself once again into an attack crouch, narrowing his eyes.

Rosepaw and Nightpaw repeated what they had done before, but with an added viciousness that, once again, brought Thumpstep down. But neither apprentice escaped without some bruises—Nightpaw lost a few clumps of fur, and Rosepaw's foot was crushed when she couldn't avoid Thumpstep as he collapsed.

"That was much better," Thrushtail praised them. "I think that's enough battle training for one day."

"Is it time for hunting?" Rosepaw asked. She tried to sound eager rather than impatient; *I just need to find out why Minnowtail's scent was all over the MoonClan border!*

"Yes, it is," Thrushtail meowed. "Catch as much prey as you can, but do it as a team. We won't be watching you, so you can work everything out independently."

Rosepaw nodded silently, replaying what he'd said in her mind. *We won't be watching you.*

"We won't let you down!" Nightpaw promised.

"Good. Then get going!" Thumpstep ordered.

Nightpaw raced off into the forest, with Rosepaw hard on his paws. She tried to push away the cold knot of anxiety that sat in her belly, and focused on the task at hand.

But I still have another mission. And this is a partner hunting session, so I can't just get rid of Nightpaw. But how can I convince him to help me if he doesn't believe Minnowtail could be a traitor?

Chapter 25

Dawnpaw's sleep was filled with strange, dark images. Rogue cats shredding her Clanmates with ease; SunClan and FireClan waging war in the midst of a fire; Rosepaw's mangled body at her paws; Sunstar's eyes boring into her just before he faded forever.

She felt a paw placed on her flank, and her eyes snapped open. Grayleaf was standing over her, watching her with concern in her eyes.

"You were tossing and turning," she observed. "Did you have another bad dream?"

"Not one from StarClan," Dawnpaw replied, her mew still raspy from waking up. "My dreams these days are made up of every problem that SunClan has. I hardly ever get good sleep anymore."

"I know how that feels," Grayleaf meowed, gazing at her sympathetically. "We medicine cats tend to be worry worms, more so than most cats. But I've found that focusing on what needs to be done helps take your mind off your worries."

Dawnpaw purred briefly. "You're not saying this just to make me work more, are you?" she asked with amused suspicion.

Grayleaf's tail whisked. "You'll have to answer that for yourself while you're out gathering herbs. You can be alone with your thoughts while you're at it."

Dawnpaw angled her ears at the well-stocked herb store. "Don't we have enough already?"

"You should know by now that I like to be prepared for absolutely anything that could happen."

"I think we *are* prepared."

"Do you want time by yourself or not?"

Dawnpaw shrugged. "All right, I'll go. But can I get something from the fresh-kill pile first?"

"Of course. But bring me something juicy before you go!" Grayleaf turned back to the pile of fresh goldenrod she was sorting.

"I will," Dawnpaw laughed, rising from her nest.

As she padded out of the den, she noticed Rosepaw walking closely beside Shadowpool. The two were headed towards Beestripe. *Maybe seeing if they can go out on a morning patrol.*

Dawnpaw chose a small mouse from the prey pile and crouched with her paws tucked under her to eat. When she looked up from her first bite, she saw Rosepaw leaving camp with Nightpaw, Thrushtail, and Thumpstep. Her sister looked happy on the outside, but Dawnpaw could see past her facade. In truth, she seemed dismayed, and kept casting glances back at the warriors' den.

Dawnpaw followed her sister's gaze and noticed that several warriors were gathering materials to patch up a large hole in the den wall. *Great StarClan, that's big! What in the world caused* that *to happen?*

A hole like that in the den wall would cause a strong draft. Some cats could catch colds or coughs if it wasn't fixed soon. Dawnpaw hoped the damage wasn't too bad.

But it still didn't explain why Rosepaw looked that upset. She noticed Pineclaw was one of the cats tasked with patching up the hole; perhaps she was upset that she couldn't train with her own mentor today?

No. My sister wouldn't be so frustrated about something as small as that.

Dawnpaw gnawed thoughtfully on her mouse. Maybe it had something to do with Shadowpool? Rosepaw *had* been talking to him just before she'd left camp. Had she wanted to go out into the forest with him? Why? *Those two get along, but they've never really been friends,* she thought. *Not like she's friends with Nightpaw.*

Dawnpaw couldn't think of any reason her sister could be worked

up. Maybe it was simply something she didn't know about.

There are a lot of things I don't know about Rosepaw these days, she realized, feeling a sharp pang of regret. She longed for the old days of sleeping together in the nursery, and play-fighting at the edges of the camp. Back then, they had stuck by each other like burrs stuck to fur, and there was nothing one didn't know about the other. Life had been so simple and content. But their apprenticeships—and the recent trouble SunClan was in—had pushed them apart. They were still close, of course...but it wasn't the same.

One of the hardest parts of growing up, I suppose, Dawnpaw told herself wistfully. She scrambled to her paws. *I should bring Grayleaf some prey, and then go get those herbs for her.*

Quickly she chose a thrush from the pile—she knew her mentor loved thrush—and trotted away to the medicine den. She left it at the entrance and meowed a quick farewell, letting Grayleaf know she was leaving. Then she made a beeline for the camp entrance and slithered through the fern tunnel.

As she walked, Dawnpaw gazed around, in awe of the forest's leaf-fall beauty. When even the slightest wind blew in, it was enough to send dozens of colorful leaves fluttering to the ground. She resisted the urge to leap up and catch one, even though the exercise would warm her up in the chilly weather.

This is the perfect time to collect goldenrod, she realized with a jolt. She remembered Grayleaf showing her the place where the tall yellow flowers grew, in a large clump near the MoonClan border. By now the stalks would be in full bloom.

Grayleaf will be pleased with how much I bring back! Dawnpaw thought smugly as she charged off, leaves crunching and flying in her wake.

She slowed down the moment she tasted MoonClan scent on her tongue, not wanting to accidentally cross the scent markers. She could smell the goldenrod, too, but it was much more faint.

Dawnpaw slithered through the thin undergrowth, and froze with a

sudden gasp. She could see the goldenrod stems, sticking up at least two tail-lengths, but...

The flowers are all gone!

Her heart lurched in dismay and confusion, and she bounded up to the plants. The stems were unharmed, but each and every flower had been picked clean off.

Did something eat them? No, that's not it. No animal would eat the flower so neatly like that. Something else is going on here...but what?

Her fur bristling, Dawnpaw turned and sniffed the ground carefully. The scent of the flowers was not only on the actual plants, but all over this stretch of land. It was as if someone had deliberately spread the scent all over the border...

To cover up another scent?

Dawnpaw gasped, her mind suddenly whirling. What if someone from MoonClan had been trespassing, and had used the goldenrod to mask their smell? Or maybe MoonClan had *stolen* the herbs, and that would explain why the scent of them was all over the place.

Dawnpaw felt her legs buckle in a brief, overwhelming sense of horror. *SunClan has threats at every one of our borders. The rogues at Twolegplace, the fox-hearted code breakers in FireClan, and now herb-stealing cats in MoonClan. What are we supposed to do if the entire forest is pitted against us?*

She took a deep breath to steady herself. She didn't know for sure that MoonClan was actually behind whatever had happened here. SunClan just needed to investigate. They had some of the best trackers in all four Clans, because of the dense forest they lived in; finding the scent that was hidden beneath the goldenrod wouldn't be too hard for warriors like Cherryfur.

But before Dawnpaw could start racing back to camp, a quiet, urgent hiss stopped her in her tracks.

"Please. I don't want to have to do this alone. I *can't* do this alone."

That's Rosepaw!

Dawnpaw dropped low to the ground, anxious she would be seen. Who was her sister talking to, and what was she doing so close to the border?

Her ears pricked at the sound of another cat's voice. It sounded confused and a little angry. *Nightpaw.*

"Then don't do it! You have no reason to be so suspicious of Minnowtail, so why are you so desperate to prove she's a traitor?"

Dawnpaw stifled a gasp. *So that's what this is about.* She backed into the shelter of a holly bush and strained her ears to listen.

"I'm not *desperate* to prove anything." Rosepaw sounded hurt. "It's not like I *want* Minnowtail to be a traitor. I just want SunClan to be safe—well, as safe as we can be at the moment."

"Okay, so you found her scent all over the MoonClan border. That could have just been her setting extra markers to keep them out. And you completely masked them with goldenrod—which is a precious herb, might I add—and destroyed that evidence. If it was even evidence in the first place."

Dawnpaw's heart lurched again. *Rosepaw* was behind the missing goldenrod! *What in StarClan's name was she thinking?* she thought angrily.

"If I'd known the flowers were goldenrod, I wouldn't have used them!" Rosepaw retorted. "And Shadowpool and I didn't want her to get in trouble when we weren't sure what happened!"

"But now it seems like that's *exactly* what you're doing," Nightpaw growled. "You have no idea what Minnowtail could have been doing, and yet you still decide to be suspicious of her. She's done *nothing* wrong, Rosepaw. Can't you see that?"

Rosepaw was silent for several heartbeats. Dawnpaw could practically feel her dismay crashing over her in waves.

At last she whispered, "Nightpaw, I'm sorry. I know it's not much to

go off of—"

"It's not *anything* to go off of."

"—but SunClan is already in so much danger, with the rogues stealing prey and FireClan acting so aggressively. You must understand that we wouldn't stand a chance against a threat from inside our own borders—"

"*There is no threat!*" Nightpaw snarled. "You're trying to make trouble from nothing, Rosepaw. And you're getting me involved in it. I don't understand why you're doing this!"

"I didn't mean to get you involved in any of this," Rosepaw cried. "It was supposed to be me and Shadowpool, but then Beestripe assigned him to work on fixing the hole in the warrior den, which wasn't what I'd planned..."

She trailed off suddenly. Now Dawnpaw could sense her shame and fear, so strong that it was an effort to keep her own fur flat.

"What you'd *planned*?" Nightpaw sounded bewildered. He said nothing for a moment that seemed like seasons to Dawnpaw—and certainly to Rosepaw too—before he spoke again.

His voice was deathly quiet. "Did *you* make the hole in the den?"

Rosepaw took a deep breath. "Nightpaw, please. Just hear me out —"

"No, just *shut up*. I've heard enough." Nightpaw sounded angrier than Dawnpaw had ever heard him before. "I can't believe this. You actually think that everything you're doing is for the *good* of the Clan? Tearing a hole in the warrior den as a distraction, and then placing stupid suspicions on a cat who's done nothing?"

"I *know* it wasn't the best way, but I had to do something!" If Rosepaw hadn't been desperate before, she definitely was now. "I'm just trying to help...I..."

"What?" Nightpaw growled.

"You're going to tell Adderstar. About everything." Rosepaw's tone had gone from certain, to desperate, to utterly defeated. "You might as well go back to camp now. I'll catch up with you."

"Oh, I'm not saying a word," Nightpaw said quietly. "This is me repaying the favor for when you took all the blame for the kits going missing."

"Y-you won't tell anyone?" Rosepaw repeated, sounding hopeful and confused at the same time.

"No. But trust me when I say this: we are *not* friends anymore. I'm not practicing battle moves with you, or sharing prey, or even talking to you." Nightpaw sounded so sure of himself, Dawnpaw thought, but the words seemed choked. Like it broke his heart to say all this.

Rosepaw was speechless. Nightpaw swept on.
"I used to think you were so thoughtful, so reasonable. You were so eager to learn and you had a good sense of humor. Whenever I wanted to do something fun, I always came to you. I even thought that we could be something more than just friends. But all this time you've just been padding after Pineclaw without a care in the world about me."

"Wait, Nightpaw..." Rosepaw sounded just as shocked as Dawnpaw felt. "You were *in love with me*?"

Nightpaw hissed. "You really don't get it, do you? You never have. You've done all these insane things and didn't give a mousetail about how I felt about it. You couldn't even see that I was in love with you, when the idea was practically sitting between your paws!"

Rosepaw's meow was quiet and shaky. "If I had known..."

"It wouldn't have changed anything. You'd still love Pineclaw, more than you'll ever love me." Nightpaw sounded so hurt, Dawnpaw could almost feel her heart breaking along with his.

"I'm not doing this anymore," he said. "I can't look at you the same way. I won't tell any cat what you've been up to, but we're done."

And with that, Dawnpaw watched the dark apprentice stalk away into the undergrowth. Her mouth was wide open in shock. She could hardly believe what she had just witnessed.

Suddenly Rosepaw spoke up. "Dawnpaw, I can smell you there. I know you heard everything, so you might as well come out." More than once her voice cracked with sobs of grief.

Reluctantly Dawnpaw emerged from the holly bush and gazed at her sister. It tore at her heart to see Rosepaw so stunned and grief-stricken, so...lost.

"Are you angry with me too?" she whispered.

Dawnpaw shook her head slowly. "No. No, I'm not."

It was then that Rosepaw choked out a cry of pure anguish, and her legs folded beneath her. Instantly Dawnpaw rushed to comfort her, pressing her flank against her sister's limp, trembling body.

Oh, Rosepaw...what have you done?

Chapter 26

It had been several sunrises since that fateful day with Nightpaw. Rosepaw was laying just inside the apprentice den, with a pigeon she had barely touched in front of her. Outside, the rest of the Clan was cheerfully mingling beneath the setting sun. The Gathering patrol was waiting patiently beside the fern tunnel, chatting amongst themselves. Two of the cats that were going were Nightpaw and Minnowtail.

Rosepaw watched as they talked easily to each other, occasionally laughing. It felt like her former friend was deliberately hanging out with Minnowtail to get back at her. And he probably was, considering how much she had hurt him without even realizing it.

She had been confined to camp for the last Gathering, and had been so eager to go to the next one. But now she had confined herself to camp, not being able to bear so many cats around her at once—and, of course, because Minnowtail and Nightpaw were on the patrol. *I wonder if Nightpaw really kept his promise. I wouldn't be surprised if Minnowtail knows all about how I thought she was a traitor helping MoonClan in secret.*

And, the truth was that, in spite of everything that had happened, Rosepaw still couldn't bring herself to trust the pretty silver tabby. But she had sworn that she would never act out against her suspicions again, unless she had real, solid proof. Not after her world had been shattered right before her eyes.

How stupid am I, to have thought that Nightpaw would actually help me? she thought, for what was certainly not the first time. *How stupid was I, to have not known that he loved me until he said it to my face?*

There were so, so many reasons that Rosepaw was furious at herself. So many reasons that she was the dumbest, most reckless apprentice that had ever existed. She punished herself by training even harder than she had before, and barely eating anything

afterwards. As if she could even bring herself *to* eat.

As Adderstar and Beestripe rounded up the Gathering patrol to leave, Rosepaw recalled how Dawnpaw had walked silently with her all the way back to camp that day. Dawnpaw had settled her in her nest in the apprentice den, and had gone to Grayleaf saying her sister had a bellyache and couldn't train. Rosepaw had been excused to lay in her nest for the rest of the day, which was exactly what she had needed—not that it made her feel any better. Especially because *she* was the reason that Dawnpaw didn't return with any herbs. The plants she and Shadowpool had used to mask Minnowtail's scent had turned out to be goldenrod. A precious, strong healing plant that Rosepaw had wasted.

You stupid, stupid apprentice!

Rosepaw pushed the pigeon further away from her and rested her chin on her paws. She had destroyed a clump of valuable herbs, badly damaged the warriors' den, and lost her best friend in a span of just two days. And there was no one else to blame but her.

"You're not going to eat that either, are you?"

Rosepaw glanced up to see Pineclaw approaching her, his normally bright eyes darkened with concern.

Seeing her mentor—the cat she had fallen in love with over Nightpaw—made her feel sick. The memory of her best friend's words was still fresh in her mind: *You'd still love Pineclaw, more than you'll ever love me.*

"Rosepaw? Don't fall asleep on me." Pineclaw settled himself beside her, close to her but not enough that their pelts brushed. He seemed to sense that she wanted some space.

"Weren't you supposed to be on the Gathering patrol?" she asked.

"I was. But I asked Adderstar if I could stay behind and watch over you. And don't tell me that you don't need me to help you," he added briskly, "because I'm here whether you like it or not."

"Fine." Rosepaw looked away from Pineclaw, gazing blankly at the

mostly deserted camp.

"You know, the Rosepaw I know wouldn't take prey from the pile without eating it," Pineclaw meowed.

"Then maybe you don't really know me." Rosepaw couldn't stop those words from coming out.

"Just a fair warning: I'm going to ask questions until you tell me what's going on with you." Behind her, Pineclaw touched his nose to her ear. "You have no idea how much I hate seeing you like this. You're never cheerful anymore, you never eat, you never talk to anyone." He added more hesitantly, "I miss you, Rosepaw. I miss the feisty, fun cat that Adderstar apprenticed to me. The one who spoke her mind no matter the consequences, the one who would always give her life for her Clan, and nearly did, more than once."

Every word pricked Rosepaw's heart like a thorn, a thorn made of love and pain and grief and guilt all at the same time. And still she would not look at him.

"Please talk to me," Pineclaw pleaded. "You don't even have to tell me everything. Not if you don't want to. I just want to do anything that I can to bring back the Rosepaw I know...and love."

The last word hit Rosepaw like a falling tree. *He...he loves me. He really does.*

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she turned to face him. His gentle eyes were brimming with concern and hope, and love. That look brought all of her feelings for him bubbling up like a flooding river, a torrent of emotions that she knew could never cease.

"I love you too, Pineclaw," she rasped. "More than you realize. And I'm so sorry I made you so worried. I've just made so many mistakes. Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve to be happy like I used to be."

"Oh, Rosepaw, I don't care about the mistakes you've made. Even the ones I don't know about. I don't *need* to know, because no matter what, I understand that you did what you did because you

thought it was right. You shouldn't punish yourself like this, not for that."

Unable to say anything, Rosepaw leaned into Pineclaw, relishing his warm, sweet, familiar scent, and the softness of his fur. She began to purr as he rested his head atop hers, and their tails twined.

She could feel the stares of her Clanmates who hadn't gone to the Gathering. But she didn't care; all that mattered to her right now was that Pineclaw loved her too, and that he would still care about her no matter the mistakes she had made in the past.

* * *

"Wow. That's...that's a lot to take in."

"Tell me about it," Rosepaw muttered. The full moon had risen among Silverpelt, sending eerie—yet beautiful—shafts of moonlight through the forest canopy. The sight of the nighttime forest reminded her of her secret nights out of camp with Nightpaw. Bitterly she pushed the memories away.

Pineclaw had suggested they go for a walk so Rosepaw could tell him about everything. But only after she had shared her pigeon with him, which she had done and was rather grateful for. *I never noticed how hungry I've really been until now.*

"I'm really sorry about Nightpaw," her mentor sympathized. "I mean that. He was your best friend, but I never would've guessed that he sees you as more than that."

"Not anymore," Rosepaw sighed. "Instead he's spending all his spare time with Minnowtail. Probably to show me that I had no reason to be suspicious of her. And that he doesn't need me to be happy."

"He's just proving his point. Soon enough he'll realize that he still misses you, and he might try to patch things up."

"But he wants to be more than just best friends!" Rosepaw exclaimed. "Now that the truth is out, he won't be comfortable with anything else. But I..." She found herself at a loss for words, and shook her head sadly. "There's no easy way to say this. I want

Nightpaw back in my life, but I still want to be with you, and I could never have both now. And it's impossible for me to choose one cat over the other."

"I understand." Pineclaw's fur brushed hers comfortingly. "It's quite complicated, but I understand."

"Oh, Pineclaw, how did I get myself into such a *mess*?" Rosepaw whispered.

"Because you're a strong cat who always stands by what she believes," Pineclaw replied simply.

"Is that always a good thing?" Rosepaw challenged.

Pineclaw stopped walking, and turned to her when she stopped too.

"Listen to me, Rosepaw," he began. "StarClan has a path laid out for every cat from every Clan, right from the moment they're born. And I don't believe that the path your paws are on will end in tragedy. I know you think that things couldn't possibly get worse. But that's a good thing, because it means that everything can only get better. Now, I don't know *how* it will get better for you, but I can promise you that it will. And if it doesn't, then I would challenge StarClan themselves, because *you deserve to be happy*. No matter your mistakes, no matter what others tell you, no matter what you tell yourself.

"Do you understand me, Rosepaw?" Pineclaw murmured.

"I do," Rosepaw breathed. "Thank you. You have no idea how much your support means to me right now."

Pineclaw rasped his tongue over her ear lovingly. "There's more where that came from," he purred. "I'll always be here for you, you know. As your mentor, and when you're a warrior, as your mate."

Rosepaw purred so hard she almost couldn't speak. "I know," she murmured, feeling so breathlessly happy that it felt like a dream. "I know."

* * *

Rosepaw waited patiently in the medicine cat den, relaxed by the rich smell of herbs all around her. It was just past moonhigh; she was exhausted after her eventful evening, but she'd wanted to talk to Dawnpaw before she went to sleep. Plus, waiting in the medicine den meant she didn't have to see Nightpaw stalk past her without a word, tail flick, or even a twitch of his whiskers.

It was so painful for Rosepaw to think that she didn't even exist to Nightpaw anymore. And it was difficult to believe that things could ever go back to the way they were between her and her friend. But she had to have faith that Nightpaw wouldn't be taken from her forever.

The den entrance suddenly rustled, and Grayleaf slid through the tunnel. A hiss, and her briefly glinting claws in the moonlight, indicated that Rosepaw had startled her.

"What are you doing in here?" she rasped. "You scared me out of my fur."

"Sorry," Rosepaw mewed. "I just wanted to talk with Dawnpaw for a moment."

"Well, I'm right here." Dawnpaw followed her mentor through the tunnel and blinked at her sister.

"You can talk outside, so I can get some sleep," Grayleaf grunted, heading for her nest.

Rosepaw padded out of the den with Dawnpaw on her heels. Rosepaw still hadn't told her sister how thankful she was that she had been forgiven, and that her secrets would be kept. During their walk back to camp, she had been too shocked to say a word.

"So what's all this about?" Dawnpaw sat down in the clearing, wrapping her fluffy tail neatly around her paws.

Rosepaw followed suit. "I just wanted to thank you for always sticking by me, no matter what I've done. You've no idea what that means to me."

Dawnpaw gave her chest a couple of self-conscious licks. "I'm your

sister. Even if I think you're being a reckless mouse-brain, I'm still going to love you and support you."

Rosepaw perked up suddenly. She had just recalled something.

"Dawnpaw, do you remember telling me that I never had to worry about upsetting you?"

Dawnpaw nodded. "Yes. I was sorting herbs, and you came in to apologize to me."

Rosepaw twitched her whiskers; her sister certainly had a good memory.

"Well, I *do* worry about upsetting you. All the time. I'm always scared that something I do will offend you, and then you'll stop talking to me. Losing Nightpaw was...challenging, to say the least. But I can't even *begin* to imagine what would happen to me if you stopped talking to me. I've known you for my whole life, and I couldn't bear losing you."

"You'll never lose me, Rosepaw!" Dawnpaw sounded surprised, as if she hadn't expected her sister to think this way. "You might not realize it, but I'm just as scared of losing you as you are of losing me. Why else would I always get so worked up every time you come into the medicine den with injuries? Or every time I think you're mad at me for some unexplained reason?"

"I understand," Rosepaw purred, weak with relief that her sister felt the same way. "All I wanted was to make sure we were still close like before."

"Well, you have my word." Dawnpaw brushed her cheek against Rosepaw's. "I'll always be with you, whenever you need me."

Rosepaw licked her sister's ear, bursting with happiness. "And when you need me, I'm here too."

"Good. Because sometimes I think Grayleaf's crankiness is going to drive me insane."

Rosepaw laughed. "Hang in there. All your training can't have been

for nothing!"

"It'd better not be!" Dawnpaw mewed. She stretched luxuriously with a wide yawn. "I'm going to my nest now. You should, too. You've been up far too late."

"Yes, Patchflower," Rosepaw purred jokingly.

"Speaking of her," Dawnpaw added, "you should make sure Patchflower and Quickstorm know that you're feeling a little better. All this time I had to keep telling them that your bellyache was still bothering you, and I think they've had enough of *that* excuse."

"Right, I'll tell them in the morning," Rosepaw promised. "Goodnight, Dawnpaw."

"Goodnight!" her sister called as she retreated to her nest. Rosepaw turned away and did the same, careful not to wake Nightpaw.

The sight of her former best friend still made her chest ache, but for the first time in a while Rosepaw began to feel hopeful again. Even if Nightpaw wasn't part of her life anymore, she still had Dawnpaw and her parents, and Pineclaw.

It dawned on Rosepaw that she'd never told her sister that she and Pineclaw were going to be mates when she was a warrior. *She'll be so happy for me,* she thought, stifling a purr. *And she'll be mad that I didn't tell her as soon as I found out!*

She let the warm, content feeling of sleep overwhelm her. As long as she still had her family, she knew that everything would be alright in the end.

Chapter 27

Rosepaw raced through the shadowy forest, her lungs burning and tail streaming out behind her. Nightpaw was just in front of her; all she could see was the tip of his tail, lit up by the full moon.

"Come on, slow slug!" he teased her.

"I'm gonna get you!" Rosepaw panted, laughter bubbling inside her. These were the times she appreciated the most, sneaking out of camp at night with her best friend and playing in the moonlit forest. All her worries, all her soreness from training, were gone with the wind the moment her paws touched the forest floor.

Wait...those days are over. Nightpaw doesn't even talk to me now!

Rosepaw slid to a halt, blinking in confusion. She looked to where Nightpaw was standing, and gasped.

He was no longer there. In his place was a small cat with black patches staining his white fur. His amber eyes glared at her mockingly.

Oh no...I remember this cat, Rosepaw thought suddenly, horrified. *I thought these dreams were over!*

The strange cat's claws gleamed challengingly under the moon. "So, are you ready for your revenge yet?" he hissed.

Rosepaw tried to tell him that she didn't know what he was talking about. But she just couldn't get the words out. Instead her dream-self let out a long, low growl. "I'd like nothing better!"

Narrowing her eyes, she launched herself at the little cat and tackled him to the ground. He screeched as her claws sunk deep into his shoulders, pinning him to the ground.

I don't want to do this! the real Rosepaw thought, trapped inside her own body. *What's happening to me?*

Her dream-self snarled with a sinister delight. "I'm going to make you feel just as much pain as he did."

"No, please," the black-and-white cat croaked. He coughed up earth, his face pressed helplessly into the ground. "You don't have to do this!"

"You didn't have to do what you did either," Rosepaw hissed. "But here we are." *What did this cat do? Why do I hate him so much? Please,* she begged to no one in particular, *I need to know!*

Baring her teeth menacingly, Rosepaw sunk the claws of one paw into the tom's throat. He gasped in pain, writhing desperately to escape her grip.

Slowly, agonizingly, she drew her paw across his neck, slicing the skin open as she went. Spatters of blood hit the ground, and landed hot on her fur; the cat released a gurgled cry as he choked on his own blood, but Rosepaw didn't care.

"That's right," she snarled. "Feel the pain. The same pain that I've felt for far too long." Inside, these words and inescapable feelings of anger and grief and satisfaction were as horrifying as watching this cat's death, his blood on her paws.

There's something wrong with me. Everything I'm doing is against the warrior code! As if arguing with her own mind, she added, *He deserves this. Every drop of blood is payment for what he did.*

Suddenly the patched tom went limp, his final breath sending another spurt of blood from the nasty gash in his throat. His eyes stared sightlessly up at the forest canopy, the sheer agony of his last moments clear in his expression.

Shadows lurked at the edge of Rosepaw's vision as her dream came to an end. With a final hiss of disdain, she spat, "Wherever you're going, you don't deserve peace."

She opened her eyes to pale morning sunlight filtering through tiny holes in the apprentice den walls. Still breathing rapidly from her nightmare, she took a deep breath to steady herself before rising

from her nest. Several nests away, Nightpaw was still fast asleep. *Or maybe he's just pretending to sleep so he doesn't have to talk to me.*

Stifling a sigh, Rosepaw emerged from the den, narrowing her eyes against the sun. She was surprised at how cold it was, and fluffed up her pelt to shield herself. The camp was mostly empty as usual, with most of those who didn't go out on patrol still in their dens.

I'll see if there's anything for me to do, she decided. *Anything to take my mind off of those dreams...*

This was the third time Rosepaw had dreamed of the same cat. And in every single dream she had killed him coldly, showing him no mercy. Every time, the dream was less vague and gave more explanations—this time, she and the cat had actually *talked*, revealing that Rosepaw was clearly doing this for revenge.

It must be revenge on a rogue cat, because in the second dream SunClan was battling rogues. He was one of them. Rosepaw shivered from something other than cold. The more she pieced everything together, the more anxious she felt.

Where's Beestripe? She couldn't see him anywhere. Maybe he had gone on a patrol after organizing the others? What was she supposed to do, just sit around in camp until sunhigh with nothing to do?

Then she noticed a dark, bulky shape emerging from the cave beneath the Cliffrock. Adderstar. He was heading right towards her, his tail high in the air.

Rosepaw met him halfway, curious about what he wanted from her. "Did you need me for something, Adderstar?"

"Yes." Adderstar flicked his ears toward the apprentice den. "Go wake up Nightpaw. I need both of you in my den. Your mentors will be waiting with me."

Rosepaw blinked. "Are we in trouble?" she stammered.

"Go get Nightpaw, and you'll find out," Adderstar answered simply. He spun around and trotted gracefully back into his den.

Bewildered, Rosepaw returned to her den. Had Adderstar noticed that she and Nightpaw never spoke anymore? Was that was this was about? Or maybe they had done something wrong without realizing, and they were about to find out what it was.

Rosepaw poked her head through the entrance. "Nightpaw," she meowed uncertainly, knowing he wouldn't take kindly to be woken up—by her, of all cats. "Adderstar wants to see us in his den."

Nightpaw grunted something incoherent; then his eyes blinked open. They narrowed when he saw her, and he muttered, "Okay, let's go."

Rosepaw backed out of the entrance so her old friend could come out. They walked side by side in a very uncomfortable silence. Rosepaw was acutely aware that Nightpaw had the power to reveal all the secrets she had been so desperate to keep. He knew everything.

Suddenly a chilling idea entered her mind: had Nightpaw *told Adderstar* about the things she'd done?

Rosepaw made an effort to keep her fur lying flat. Part of her said that she deserved to be exposed anyway, while the rest of her swore to slash Nightpaw's ears if he had broken the promise he'd made so seriously.

Even more anxious than before, Rosepaw entered the leader's cave with Nightpaw at her heels.

Adderstar was talking quietly with Pineclaw at the center of the cave, while Thrushtail sat near one wall and was grooming himself thoroughly.

Rosepaw's heart skipped a beat like it always did when she spotted her mentor. Then she realized that Nightpaw was glaring at her with slitted, icy blue eyes, and immediately felt guilty.

Then she pushed that feeling away. *I'm sorry that you're upset, Nightpaw, but I'm in love with Pineclaw, and there's nothing that will change my mind. You'll just have to get over it.*

Aloud she mewed, "You wanted to see us?"

Pineclaw turned around, his eyes glowing with pride. "We and Adderstar have decided that it's time for your warrior assessment."

"Both of us?" Rosepaw gasped. Her fur bristled with excitement, and she fought the urge to leap into the air with joy. "Yes! Nightpaw, we're going to be *warriors* at last!"

For once, the black apprentice's emotions didn't seem to be getting in the way. His eyes were now shining with anticipation. "We've waited so long, and now it's finally time!" he whispered.

Thrushtail nodded, looking as proud of his apprentice as Pineclaw did of Rosepaw. "You both have trained very hard, and have been through quite a bit even though you're still rather young. You deserve to be made warriors by now."

"Thank you, thank you!" Rosepaw purred. "So when does the assessment start? What are we doing?"

"It will be a partner hunting session in the trees," Adderstar explained. "Your mentors are interested in how your climbing and tree hunting skills are coming along."

"Great!" Rosepaw turned in an impatient circle. "Can we start now?"

"The sooner, the better," Thrushtail replied. "If you're both ready to go, then we can go."

"Did you want to eat something first, Nightpaw?" Rosepaw offered. She hoped that he would accept so she wouldn't be hunting with an empty belly. And because it would mean he wasn't *totally* bent on avoiding her.

Nightpaw stared at her a moment, his expression unreadable; then he nodded. "Sure. Come on."

Rosepaw glanced delightedly at Pineclaw for a heartbeat. He twitched his whiskers in amusement. Then Rosepaw followed Nightpaw out of the cave.

Feeling slightly awkward, she mewed, "I think we'll do fantastic. We'll be warriors by sundown."

"For sure," Nightpaw agreed, sounding genuinely pleased. At the fresh-kill pile, he stopped and turned to face her.

"Listen," he began. "I still haven't forgiven you for...all those things. But I'm willing to put it aside for now, if it means we both get to be warriors."

Dozens of emotions whirled through Rosepaw's mind, but all she could do was nod her thanks to the cat who was once her best friend.

* * *

Rosepaw's nose twitched madly as she detected a squirrel. She angled her ears toward the roots of the oak tree, where there were plenty of acorns.

Nightpaw nodded briskly. "Remember that technique that Shadowpool and Minnowtail used when they were apprentices? Let's go with that."

Rosepaw forced herself not to wince at the sound of Minnowtail's name. "I'll chase it up the tree, and you can catch it as it scurries up."

"Good luck." Nightpaw slid backwards into the undergrowth, and then he was gone. Rosepaw gave him some time to climb up the tree by scouting for the squirrel she had scented. Soon they would have another addition to the small pile of squirrels they had already caught. *And they're nice and plump, because they're getting ready for leaf-bare,* she thought with satisfaction.

Suddenly a flash of brown fur darted from the roots of the oak, a huge acorn between its tiny forepaws. It started to nibble on it.

Here we go! Certain that Nightpaw would be ready by now, Rosepaw charged from the bushes.

The squirrel squealed in terror and fled up the tree trunk,

abandoning its acorn. Rosepaw watched smugly as it climbed, only to be pinned against the tree by Nightpaw, who quickly killed it with a bite to its neck.

"Nice one!" she purred at him. "Be careful coming back down, though."

"I've been climbing trees longer than you have!" Nightpaw retorted good-humoredly. "I've got this."

Rosepaw's tail curled happily. *I think this partner hunting is just what the two of us needed.*

But as Nightpaw was making his way down the tree, a screech sounded deeper in the forest. Whatever it was, it sounded like it was in pain.

"What in StarClan's name was that?" Nightpaw hissed as he landed beside Rosepaw. His fur was bristling.

There was another yowl, even louder this time. All of a sudden Rosepaw recognized the voice. "That's Pineclaw!"

She darted off in the direction of the sound, her heart pounding with anxiety, and Nightpaw right on her tail. Was Pineclaw being attacked? By what? Was there another fox lurking around? *I have to find him!*

She couldn't decide whether it was a good sign that Pineclaw hadn't yowled a third time. All she could do was run as fast as she could, her paws barely touching the ground with each stride.

Suddenly she picked up the scent of cat blood, and something else...

"It's those StarClan-forsaken rogues!" Nightpaw snarled.

"Oh, no..." Rosepaw remembered the last time she'd fought one of the rogues, during a tracking-and-ambush test with Pineclaw. She had been scared that the rogue was going to attack Pineclaw when he wasn't expecting it, and had leaped to his defense. Was she too late this time?

The thought only pushed her to run faster, until she burst through a thick swath of ferns and came upon an alarming sight, with Nightpaw sliding to a halt at her side.

Thrushtail was standing over the body of another cat, who was lifeless, her own blood darkening her spotted gray fur. Her scent told Rosepaw that she had been a rogue. Thrushtail looked frightful—his ear was torn savagely, and scratches all over his flanks trickled blood. But his eyes glinted ferociously, as if he still had plenty of fight left in him after killing this rogue.

His eyes widened when he saw the two apprentices gaping at him.

"Thrushtail!" Nightpaw rushed forward to examine his mentor closely. "That rogue...what *happened* here?"

"There were two rogues," the senior warrior rasped. Suddenly he gasped, "Pineclaw! Where did he go? He disappeared with the other one during the fight..."

He stopped for breath; Rosepaw could tell that he needed to be seen to by Grayleaf.

As if reading her thoughts, Nightpaw gazed at her anxiously. "I'll go get help back at camp. You should find Pineclaw, and make sure Thrushtail hangs in there until I come back."

"I'm not a helpless kit," Thrushtail grunted in protest.

"I know you're not," Nightpaw retorted. "You're an injured warrior. And I'll be back with Grayleaf and some other warriors in a flash."

"Be safe!" Rosepaw called as he bounded away. Then she lifted her nose into the air, checking for any scent of Pineclaw. *Where could he have gone? Is he okay?*

Surprisingly she smelled him almost immediately, his scent mingling with that of blood and rogues. And the fact that there was no wind meant that her mentor was very close by. *That's good!*

"Pineclaw, it's me!" she yowled, brushing past some more ferns as she padded in the direction of his scent trail. "Where are you?"

There was no response. Frowning, Rosepaw shoved her way through one last fern clump.

And, laying limp in the grass, his dark ginger fur almost black with the blood that pooled around him, was Pineclaw.

Chapter 28

"I'm not sick, I promise." Acornkit's round eyes stared pleadingly up at Dawnpaw. "Don't make me eat any yucky leaves, please!"

"I won't, Acornkit," Dawnpaw purred. "But you need to stay away from Crowkit for a little while so you don't end up getting sick."

Grayleaf had asked her to check up on Rainfoot's kits, because Crowkit had caught a cough a day or two ago. Thankfully it hadn't been anything serious—just an average cold—but Dawnpaw wasn't taking any chances of getting the other kits sick too.

"Okay!" Acornkit turned to face her other littermates, her head and tail held high with authority. "Did you hear that, guys? Stay away from Crowkit until he's not sick anymore, so we don't get sick too."

Leafkit and Flashkit nodded solemnly. The whole scene made Dawnpaw twitch her whiskers with amusement. *Little Acornkit, always bossing her brothers and sisters around!*

Rainfoot looked up at Dawnpaw from her nest. "You're sure it's not whitecough or greencough that Crowkit has?"

Dawnpaw nodded. "He'll be alright in no time," she reassured the anxious queen. "As long as he eats well and stays warm. *And* if he eats these herbs," she added, looking pointedly at Crowkit, who was nestled in his mother's belly fur. They looked so similar that only the kit's pale green eyes showed that it was not the same cat.

"Not again!" he groaned. "Is it that awful tansy stuff again? Do I *have* to eat it?"

"Your medicine cat knows what's best for you, even if you don't like it," Rainfoot told her son sternly.

Dawnpaw swelled with pride. She liked the way Rainfoot didn't call her an apprentice, or an assistant. It was almost like she was a true

medicine cat, doing a routine checkup on her Clan's kits on her own time. *Someday!*

She swept the tansy flowers toward Crowkit with one forepaw. "Make sure he eats them," she told Rainfoot. "I'll go tell Grayleaf that he's doing fine."

"Thanks, Dawnpaw!" Rainfoot purred.

"Of course," she mewed, happily padding out of the den.

"So how's Crowkit?" Grayleaf prompted when she returned to the medicine den. "Did anyone else catch his cold?"

"Everyone's doing fine," Dawnpaw reported. "I left Rainfoot to make sure Crowkit eats the tansy. He's not very fond of it."

"Kits," grunted Grayleaf. "If this dose doesn't cure the cough, then maybe I'll sweeten the next dose with some honey."

"Or mouse blood," Dawnpaw suggested. "Since Crowkit's always been a picky eater, maybe coating the tansy in mouse blood will help him get used to eating solid food when the time comes."

Grayleaf blinked warmly at her apprentice. "That's a wonderful idea! I think I'll do that."

Dawnpaw suppressed the urge to leap up with pride. *Today just keeps getting better!*

"Is there anything else I need to do?" she prompted her mentor.

Grayleaf shook her head. "Not that I can think of. But I'll let you know if I've forgotten something." She nodded towards the den entrance. "For now you should rest up, maybe get something to eat."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Dawnpaw trotted out of the den.

Then she let out a choked gasp of horror. The camp was *not* as it was before.

The sky was as dark as a night with no moon, and ashes fell from

the clouds like rain. The trees were red, but not the leaf-fall red that Dawnpaw had gotten used to. These were a crimson red, and they filled the air with the metallic tang of blood until she could smell and taste nothing else. The camp, which had been dotted with cats soaking up the sunlight before, was now deserted, save for one glittering cat that stood in the center of the clearing.

Violetsky!

With her fur standing on end, Dawnpaw bounded towards her StarClan friend.

"Violetsky, what's going on?" she cried. "Do you have something to tell me?"

"I do, little one," Violetsky meowed. "It may seem like all is well, but you must not let your guard down. Dark times are coming to your Clan soon; there is still a prophecy to fulfill."

"Sunstar's prophecy," Dawnpaw whispered, her belly tight with dread.

Violetsky spoke in a deep, ancient voice that did not sound like her own. "*Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun.*" The air held the prophecy's echo like stone walls, sending a shiver down Dawnpaw's spine.

"I wish you could tell me what it all means," she said.

"I would if I knew." Violetsky's beautiful eyes glittered with regret. "I have spent much of my own spare time trying to figure out what it means. I have only gotten as far as you have."

It doesn't make me feel much better knowing that not even StarClan themselves knows what will happen, Dawnpaw thought anxiously.

"I won't let my guard down," she vowed to Violetsky. "And I'll figure out what the prophecy means so I can keep my Clan safe, no matter what."

"StarClan will be with you every step of the way," Violetsky breathed. "Be strong, little one."

Dawnpaw's vision darkened all of a sudden, and then she opened her eyes. She was still standing in the medicine den, and Grayleaf was watching her with an unreadable gaze.

"You just had a vision, didn't you?" the gray she-cat guessed.

"I-I did." Dawnpaw was still reeling from the memory. "It was the same StarClan cat that keeps visiting me. She told me not to let my guard down, because the prophecy still has to be fulfilled."

"*Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun,*" Grayleaf quoted darkly. "Only time can tell us what that means."

"Well, she said that dark times are coming *soon*. I don't know what exactly *soon* meant, but I'm going to assume it's in the very near future."

"Then we must be prepared," Grayleaf growled. "Whatever happens, SunClan will *not* be destroyed by this."

"We need to tell Adderstar!" Dawnpaw blurted. "He has no idea what's going on, but if this prophecy concerns SunClan's future, then he needs to know."

"Good point," Grayleaf grunted. "I'll go find him. I'm quite sure he's still—"

A panic-stricken yowl cut off the rest of the medicine cat's words.

"That sounded like Nightpaw!" Dawnpaw gasped. "Did something go wrong with the assessment?" *Is Rosepaw okay?*

"It's possible," Grayleaf replied briskly. "Let's go see what's happening."

As they emerged from the den, Dawnpaw was briefly relieved that the forest wasn't covered in blood, and ash was no longer falling from above. A ragged group of warriors was gathered around Nightpaw, who was bristling with fear. His pale eyes widened when he saw Grayleaf and Dawnpaw.

"You have to help us!" he begged. "Rogues attacked Thrushtail and

Pineclaw during the assessment. Rosepaw and I are okay, but they're hurt really badly. Please hurry!"

"I know what herbs we need," Dawnpaw gasped. "I'll be back in a flash." She whipped around and raced back into the medicine den, her heart pounding.

She gathered bundles of goldenrod and marigold in her jaws—and slipped a few poppy seeds into the goldenrod bundle just in case they were needed—and stuck a thick wad of cobwebs to her paw. She limped rapidly out of the den, careful not to trip or drop anything.

"Perfect," Grayleaf meowed as she returned. "Now let's go; there's no time to lose."

The race to the scene of the attack seemed to take moons; halfway through Nightpaw offered to carry the cobwebs in his mouth. Dawnpaw gratefully accepted, and ran much faster without the cobwebs stuck on her paw. The scent of blood, and the stale stench of rogues, alerted her that the group was getting close.
When they burst into the clearing, Nightpaw glanced around, clearly confused. There were no cats to he found.

"That's...strange," he meowed. "They were right here—"

"We're over here, Nightpaw." The raw grief in Thrushtail's voice—it came from the other side of another patch of ferns—made Dawnpaw's heart lurch. What had happened?

The group slid through the ferns into a second, smaller clearing. And yes, Thrushtail looked beat up, but it was nothing compared to what Dawnpaw saw in front of her.

Her sister was trembling madly, leaning over a dark red tabby shape that she recognized as Pineclaw. His blood pooled at Rosepaw's paws, but she didn't seem to notice or care.

"It'll be okay now," she was rasping. "Grayleaf and Dawnpaw are here. They'll patch up your wounds and then you'll be okay."

"It's...it's too late for that," Pineclaw whispered in reply. "No amount

of herbs or cobwebs could...could help me now."

"No!" Rosepaw shrieked. "It's not too late. It can't be, it *isn't*. Please, just hold on a little longer..."

Dawnpaw exchanged a devastated glance with Grayleaf. The look in her mentor's eyes hinted that it was indeed too late to save Pineclaw.

"Rosepaw, listen to me," he was saying now. "You did...did great during your assessment. You and Nightpaw will be warriors...but I can't be there with you. Not...anymore. I'm so, so sorry."

"No, Pineclaw." Dawnpaw had never in her life heard Rosepaw sound this heartbroken. Even when Nightpaw had said they weren't friends anymore, she hadn't sounded like this. "If you aren't going to be there, then I don't want to be a warrior."

"You can't...throw away everything you've worked so...so hard for..." Pineclaw was making a huge effort to keep speaking. "...for me. You still have to do this. Please."

"We were going to be mates," Rosepaw sobbed. "Maybe even have kits someday. Please, Pineclaw. Please don't leave me. I love you so much."

"I love you, too," Pineclaw murmured. His eyes were fluttering now, but when they were open they glowed with wistful affection. "And I wish it didn't...have to...be this way. But now I will watch over you...from StarClan."

The young warrior's eyes closed again, but this time they did not open again. His flank stilled as his last breath left his body.

Dawnpaw stared speechlessly. *If we had gotten here sooner, if we'd done something...oh, StarClan, no...*

Thrushtail bowed his head low, seemingly not caring anymore about his injuries. "He lives again in StarClan," he whispered.

Rosepaw had her front paws on Pineclaw's flank, shaking him desperately, wailing his name over and over again. Seemingly on

impulse, Nightpaw raced forward and pressed himself against her in an attempt to comfort her.

Grayleaf's voice sounded far away. "Thrushtail, do you think you could make it back to camp with me? We need to bring warriors to carry Pineclaw's body back to camp." Her voice cracked with sadness.

"Of course," Thrushtail murmured. "Let's go."

As they padded away, Nightpaw turned to meet Dawnpaw's eyes. "She needs you," he murmured, backing away from Rosepaw.

Dawnpaw nodded mutely and approached her sister, who now had her muzzle buried deep in his fur.

Unsure of what would comfort Rosepaw, she meowed, "He'll be happier and safer in StarClan. No leaf-bare, no sickness or starvation, no wounds. He's okay now."

Rosepaw lifted her head, her green eyes staring numbly at her. "He's really gone, isn't he?" she rasped. "My mentor, my future mate. He's dead."

Dawnpaw shook her head sadly. "He's gone. Rosepaw, I'm so sorry. There was nothing Grayleaf and I could've done to save him." She stared at the deep gash in Pineclaw's belly, the fatal wound that had cost him his life. *Even if there* was *anything we could've done*, she added silently, *we wouldn't have been able to carry him all the way to camp without reopening that wound again. His chances were slim the whole time.* These thoughts brought Dawnpaw no comfort, but they flitted through her mind anyway.

"He had a whole life ahead of him." Rosepaw looked up at her sister. "*We* had a whole life ahead of *us*." She sounded utterly betrayed. "Why did StarClan do this to him? To me?"

"...I don't know, Rosepaw," Dawnpaw answered. "But I do know they wouldn't take Pineclaw from us without reason. StarClan works in mysterious ways."

"I don't see what good could ever come of this!" Rosepaw wailed.

"One of SunClan's valuable warriors is *dead*. Killed by prey-stealing rogues that think they have power over us."

Dawnpaw did not know how to respond to that. In fact, she too could not understand why StarClan had taken Pineclaw so young.

Rosepaw shook her head with despair. "I...I think I need to be alone for a while," she mumbled.

Dawnpaw watched helplessly as her sister stumbled away from her mentor's body and padded away—in the opposite direction of the camp—with her drooping tail leaving a dusty trail in the earth.

She approached Pineclaw's body and pressed her nose into his fur, which was already cold. "You made my sister happier than I've ever seen her before," she whispered. "I could feel her heart breaking like it was my own as she watched you die. You will be missed greatly by all of SunClan, but Rosepaw will miss you the most."

She lifted her eyes, gazing at the fragments of sky that poked out from the forest canopy. "StarClan," she prayed, "please help my sister through this terrible time in her life. She doesn't even want to be a warrior anymore; not without Pineclaw. I hate seeing her like this, my fiery, energetic sister so sad and lost. Please help her move on, and make sure that she feels worthy of carrying a warrior name."

Dawnpaw sighed, wondering if Violetsky could hear her. Surely the former SunClan medicine cat—so gentle and loving—would know how to help Rosepaw. Surely she hated watching Pineclaw's death as much as she had. *Make him feel welcomed in StarClan.*

She crouched beside his corpse, careful not to get any of his blood on her light fur, and waited for the patrol that would carry him back to camp.

Chapter 29

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join beneath the Cliffrock for a Clan meeting!"

It dawned on Rosepaw that the last time she'd heard Adderstar's summons was the day she became an apprentice. Now she was hearing them on the day she was to be a warrior. *Fitting,* she thought.

The sun was setting on the day after Pineclaw's death; Rosepaw and Nightpaw's warrior ceremony had been delayed so the Clan could grieve. Rosepaw had slept beside her mentor's body for the entire night, with Nightpaw beside her. He hadn't spoken to her at all, which for once hadn't made her feel annoyed or sad. She was grateful for the silent comfort.

She felt yet another wave of sadness crash over her as she thought of Pineclaw's warm, familiar scent that had wreathed gently around her when she had slept beside his body. It had faded ever-so-slowly as she dozed off, and when she awoke in the morning it was gone altogether. The realization had made her want to toss her head back and wail up at the fading stars. But instead she had stumbled stiffly to her nest and collapsed, falling asleep again in just a few moments.

No more patrols with him, or training, or sharing prey. We'll never be mates, never have kits. We'll never play fight again, or walk through the forest together again. He's really gone.

"Rosepaw." A voice she hadn't expected to hear jolted her out of her depressed thoughts. She glanced up to see Patchflower gazing down at her. Her eyes were gentle. "Come on. It's time for the ceremony."

Silently Rosepaw stood up and leaned against her mother. The pair padded toward the shadows below the Cliffrock, where the rest of the Clan was slowly gathering.

As they walked, Patchflower meowed quietly, "I want you to know that Quickstorm and I have never been prouder of any cat. You have trained and fought so hard, and you've dedicated your life to this Clan. You have stayed so strong, and so brave no matter what you've gone through. You have more than earned your right to a warrior name."

"I'm not brave, Patchflower," Rosepaw rasped. "Or strong. I just pretend to be. But inside I feel like I'm dying."

"And no one can blame you for that," her mother responded softly. "You're so young to have experienced so much. But I believe that it's because StarClan believes that you can handle it. You are special in their eyes, and no matter what, I know that they have a special destiny planned for you. Don't let your grief and sadness turn your paws away from that destiny."

"Thank you." Rosepaw's voice was shaky. "I understand." Silently she told herself, *Pineclaw wouldn't want me to keep sulking. He'd want me to become a warrior and keep living my life.*

She sighed. Much easier said than done.

Rosepaw brightened a little when she spotted Nightpaw, walking with Ebonypelt, his mother, toward the Cliffrock. A few tail-lengths behind them sat Quickstorm and Juniperfur, the two apprentices' respective fathers. They were talking quietly, casting occasional proud glances at Rosepaw and Nightpaw.

"I'm going to sit with your father," Patchflower meowed. She licked each of Rosepaw's ears lovingly. "I'm so proud of you!"

Rosepaw watched her mother trot away as Nightpaw walked up to her. The black tom looked more excited than she had ever seen before.

"This still doesn't feel real to me," he mewed, gazing around in a joyful daze.

"I can relate," Rosepaw responded quietly. "Just in a different sense."

Nightpaw blinked at her, understanding what she meant. "I get that too. He shouldn't have died this way. He didn't deserve it." He paused for a moment, then added, "There's nothing you can do about it now. All you *can* do is keep going in honor of him. Be the strong, clever, loyal warrior he trained you to be."

Rosepaw nodded absently. Her mind was on something else that had just come to mind.
Deep down inside, was Nightpaw *happy* that Pineclaw was dead? After all, his death meant that Rosepaw couldn't be mates with him, at least in life. That gave Nightpaw a chance to win her over, so they could be mates instead.

Her mind was drawn back to that fateful day when they were hunting together, and Rosepaw had confessed that she suspected Minnowtail was a traitor. In turn, Nightpaw had confessed to being in love with Rosepaw. He had been heartbroken that she loved Pineclaw instead of him. But now that Pineclaw was gone...

No, he wouldn't do that. He's been spending a lot more time with Minnowtail these days. But what if he was only doing that to show Rosepaw that the silver she-cat wasn't a traitor? He had promised never to *talk* to her again, not that he didn't *love* her anymore. His feelings could still be as strong as ever.

Rosepaw dug her claws into the cold earth. *Well, that's not going to happen. I won't let Nightpaw or anyone else take advantage of me like that. No way!*

"You okay, Rosepaw?" She realized suddenly that Nightpaw was watching her. "You seem agitated."

"Just impatient for the ceremony to start," she lied easily.

"Well, it's about to," Nightpaw purred, nodding up at the Cliffrock. Rosepaw followed his gaze and saw Adderstar approaching the edge of the giant boulder, getting ready to speak.

"Cats of SunClan," he began, "these past couple of days have been hard on all of us. Pineclaw's death was a sudden and tragic event that deeply shook all of us. And I swear on StarClan that, when we

are strong enough, we *will* get revenge on these rogues. They have tormented our Clan for too long now, and it's time they were taught a lesson they won't forget!"

Fierce caterwauls rose up from the crowd at Adderstar's empowering words. Rosepaw's fur tingled strangely, and her claws pierced the ground once again. *That sounds fun.*

"And SunClan will begin growing stronger right now," Adderstar yowled. "This evening we are making two apprentices into warriors!"

The Clan yowled and purred their approval. Several cats turned to look at Rosepaw and Nightpaw. Both cats proudly raised their heads.

"We will begin with Nightpaw." Adderstar gracefully slithered down the side of the Cliffrock and padded into the shadows near its base. "Please come forward. Thrushtail, you as well."

As Nightpaw left her side, Rosepaw's heart lurched painfully. *In a typical ceremony, the apprentice's mentor has to give their approval before the ceremony continues. What's going to happen when it's my turn?* she asked herself, her grief mixing fervently with panic. *I don't* have *a mentor, not anymore.*

She was snapped out of her anxiety when Adderstar spoke again. "Thrushtail," he meowed, "do you believe that your apprentice is ready to receive his warrior name?"

"He has never been more ready," Thrushtail responded, glancing warmly at Nightpaw. "He has trained hard and well, and he has done exactly what was asked of him without protest. I couldn't have asked for a better apprentice."

"And I couldn't have been assigned a better mentor," Nightpaw mewed, so quietly that Rosepaw only just heard him. His pale blue eyes sparkled with pride and excitement.

Rosepaw stubbornly refused to acknowledge the ache in her heart as she listened to the ceremony. *This is Nightpaw's moment, and he*

deserves it more than any cat. I'm happy for him, I really am.

"With that settled," Adderstar went on, "I, Adderstar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn." The SunClan leader's glowing amber eyes gazed down at the black tom. "Nightpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Nightpaw took a deep breath and exhaled, "I do."

The raw emotion in his voice made Rosepaw realize how many cats her old friend was making this promise to. Not just the Clan he had now, but to himself, and to the spirits of his littermates who didn't get to make this journey with him. Moons ago, he had told her, *I try to train knowing that I'll be a warrior for all three of us. I'll live in honor of the life they'll never get to see.* Now she began to truly understand what that meant.

"Then by the powers of StarClan," Adderstar meowed, "I give you your warrior name. Nightpaw, from this moment you will be known as Nightshade. StarClan honors your strength and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SunClan."

Suddenly overcome with pride for her friend, Rosepaw tossed her head back and yowled, "Nightshade! Nightshade!" The rest of the Clan quickly joined in the chant. Nightshade slowly raked his eyes over the crowd, his pelt bristling with happiness.

"Now it is Rosepaw's turn," Adderstar mewed once the cats had settled down. "Come forward."

Rosepaw forced her fur to lie flat as she slowly, steadily, walked up to the Clan leader. She was surprised by her own composure.

"As we all know," Adderstar began quietly, "Rosepaw's mentor is not here to approve of her ceremony. But approval is not needed, not for Rosepaw."

Rosepaw blinked up at Adderstar, surprised. *What is he talking*

about?

"The day before her warrior assessment, Pineclaw came to my den, asking if he could talk to me about Rosepaw," Adderstar went on. "I agreed, and he immediately began talking about how outstanding of an apprentice she was. He said that she trained as hard as she could, not letting anything distract her or get in her way. That, through all the trouble she'd been in, she'd always stayed loyal to her Clan. That he'd never seen such a young cat unafraid to speak up for what she believes, no matter the consequences."

At that moment, Rosepaw noticed a small but knowing twinkle in Adderstar's eyes. *He knows that Pineclaw loved me, and I loved him.*

"And tonight, the warrior name Rosepaw will receive is the name Pineclaw chose for her," Adderstar finished.

Rosepaw stifled a gasp. *He chose a name for me!* Love and grief clashed inside of her. *He will live on in my warrior name.*

"Rosepaw," the leader mewed, "do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

For a long moment, Rosepaw didn't think her voice would let her speak those two simple words. She could hardly breathe; her throat felt like it was swollen shut.

And suddenly, right when she thought she was going to pass out, she heard her voice ring out strong and clear across the camp. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan," Adderstar continued warmly, "I give you your warrior name. Rosepaw, from this moment you will be known as Rosethorn. StarClan honors your kind dedication and loyal ferocity, combined as one, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SunClan."

After that, there was nothing but silence. Then, the chants began.

"Rosethorn!" Dawnpaw, who loved her despite all the fights they'd had.

"Rosethorn!" Nightpaw, who was still cheering for her even after his trust in her was shattered.

"Rosethorn!" Patchflower and Quickstorm, who would always die to protect her no matter how much trouble she caused.

"Rosethorn!" Shadowpool and Minnowtail, who had been friends with her from day one, even if she still didn't fully trust the latter.

And as the entire Clan took up the call, Rosethorn thought she saw a flash of dark red fur. A faint glow of pale amber eyes. And she could have sworn on StarClan's very existence that she heard one more voice calling her name.

"Rosethorn!" Pineclaw, whose love for her would never die, even if his spirit faded from StarClan for eternity.

* * *

The night was silent and laden with shadows, broken by the light of an almost-full moon. Rosethorn was excited by the prospect of her first Gathering as a warrior.

The sun had set on the day of her and Nightshade's warrior ceremony, and now they were keeping their silent vigil at the camp entrance. But as the chilly air crept through Rosethorn's already-fluffed-up fur, she realized her belly didn't seem to know what *silent* meant. It growled once again.

Nightshade glanced sympathetically at her from a couple tail-lengths away. He seemed to be thinking the same thing that she was: *Leaf-bare is upon us now.*

After a while longer of sitting motionless, Rosethorn could take it no longer. *I'm going to circle around the camp and make sure there's nothing creeping around outside, before I turn into stone.*

She rose stiffly to her paws and stretched deeply to loosen her muscles. She could feel Nightshade's eyes boring into her as she padded away.

The nighttime forest always brought Rosethorn wistful reminders of

the nights she had sneaking out of camp with Nightshade. *Nothing was complicated back then. Not as complicated as things are now.* Briefly she wondered if Nightshade had loved her then, or if his feelings had developed sometime after that.

Now that we're warriors, we can leave camp on our own time without worrying about being caught. But that's not going to happen, because we aren't even friends anymore.

But Rosethorn wasn't even certain of that. Were she and Nightshade *really* not friends? Ever since their partner hunting session for the warrior assessment, he had been kind to her despite his promise of never speaking to her again. Perhaps he had only made that promise out of anger, and he hadn't really meant it. The thought of that made hope bloom in Rosethorn's chest like a newleaf flower.

I really don't want to lose Nightshade as my friend. I don't know what I'd do without him. She sighed. Pineclaw would've been able to make sense of all this. He would have given her some kind of advice on how to cope with this. *He always did before.*

Rosethorn glanced around the forest, her ears pricked and jaws opened to taste the air. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No unusual colors flickered in the undergrowth, no pawsteps or rustling indicated an intruder, and there were no scents that shouldn't have been there.

The forest around the camp is all clear. Surely I can take a quick break?

Rosethorn flicked her tail decisively. No cat had to know that she was taking herself off guard duty, if only for a few moments. And she'd checked that the forest was clear. She also decided, after a moment of thought, that she would visit Pineclaw's grave.

She hadn't been able to approach his place of burial before, overcome by a heartbroken grief that tore into her more than the sharpest claws when she'd tried. But now, the idea seemed much more conceivable. Rosethorn didn't know why; maybe it was because she was almost certain his spirit had been there during her warrior ceremony, cheering for her as if he was still alive.

If he was there for me, then I should be there for him, too.

Rosethorn instinctively slowed down as she quietly approached the small mound of earth, the only thing that looked out of place. Her heart began to pound as a familiar feeling of dread overtook her.

The tiniest, faintest trace of Pineclaw's stale scent hung in the air. Images of his limp, scarred, bloody shape flitted through Rosethorn's head as she fought to keep her composure. She tried to remember what Nightshade had told her, that there was nothing she could do now, but the words brought her no comfort.

Sure, I can't do anything now*, but there are a million things I could have done* before *he was killed. Something as simple as hunting in a different spot for the assessment could have changed everything.*

Although she knew deep inside of her that this was not her fault, Rosethorn couldn't escape the feeling that it was.

Her ears flattened to her head and she cringed, shakily backing away from Pineclaw's grave. Shaking her head, she croaked, "I can't do this. I can't. I'm sorry."

But just before Rosethorn could turn away and head back to camp, something else caught her eye. Lying just a couple mouse-lengths away from the dreadful mound of earth was a small clump of fur. It wasn't Pineclaw's—she could tell that just from looking at it—but it didn't look like it belonged to any cat she knew.

Blinking with confusion, Rosethorn crept toward the piece of fur. It was almost completely white, save for a few tiny spots of black mixed in.

Rosethorn crouched over the fur clump, pressing her nose into it and inhaling deeply to catch its scent. She almost instantly leaped back, numbed with shock.

That smells just like the rogues from Twolegplace! Did one of them make it this far into the forest without being seen?

Then she shook her head to herself. That couldn't be why this bit of fur was here; there were no other signs of a rogue being around

here.

"So how did it get here?" she murmured.

Out of curiosity she sniffed it again, wondering if she would recognize the scent as a rogue she had seen before.

And then, like the last bramble tendril winding perfectly into a den wall, everything clicked in her head.

Images that Rosethorn had almost forgotten faded in and out of her mind. A mouse she had pounced on suddenly morphing into a black-and-white tom; her claws sinking gleefully into his fur, pinning him to the ground; burning hatred coursing through her as the cat's round amber eyes stared up at her, dark with fear. In those dreams, Rosethorn had been getting revenge for something that the black-and-white cat had done to her. Something she hadn't been able to figure out.

Until now.

Rosethorn could not now, nor could she ever, understand how she was so certain. All she knew was that her Dawnpaw had been right about something she'd said on the day of Pineclaw's death. *StarClan works in mysterious ways,* she'd said.

Now Rosethorn thought that *mysterious* would be an understatement. StarClan had been sending her these strange, horrifying dreams of murdering an unfamiliar cat as a *warning*. A warning for something she would discover in the moons to come.

That black-and-white rogue is the cat who murdered Pineclaw!

Everything made so much sense that Rosethorn's head was spinning. The reason she had been so angry with the tom was because he had killed Pineclaw. Before this realization she had been horrified by the ferocity of her hatred. Now she knew that her feelings were completely justified.

That fox-heart needs to die for what he did to SunClan, to Pineclaw, to me. *And I'm going to make sure he gets exactly what he deserves.*

Chapter 30

"So how has it been, being a warrior at last?" Quickstorm prompted. As always, he was an eager father waiting for Rosethorn to tell him how her life had been.

Rosethorn swallowed the bite of scrawny mouse she'd been chewing. "It's barely been three days since my ceremony," she reminded him.

"Then your update will be short," Quickstorm replied. "Come on, tell me something!"

Rosethorn rolled her eyes fondly. Some things never changed. *And I'm* very *glad for that.*

"Well, it's been great not having to ask for permission just to hunt," she began. "It makes me feel like I'm getting a lot more done each day. Like I'm being much more useful, especially now that leaf-bare has really started." She glanced down at the mouse, which was living—well, now dead—proof that the coldest season had begun.

"Yes, the Clan is going to need as much prey as they can get," Quickstorm meowed. "The more hunters, the better."

"The more *apprentices*, the better," Rosethorn snorted. "It'll be a happy day for Nightshade and I when Rainfoot's kits are finally six moons old. That way we won't be stuck doing all the chores like we're still apprentices!"

Quickstorm purred. "Well, it won't be long now. And maybe Adderstar would let you and Nightshade mentor two of them."

"That would be wonderful," Rosethorn mewed. "I'm really interested in Acornkit. She's a bit of a troublemaker, but she clearly wants to be as helpful as she can."

"I think you'd be a great mentor for her." Quickstorm nodded

toward the nursery. "You should start spending more time with the kits so Adderstar can see that you're interested in mentoring one."

"That's a good idea," Rosethorn agreed. "In fact, I think I'll take them the rest of this mouse. They need it more than we do right now."

"Go ahead, then," Quickstorm responded.

Rosethorn stretched luxuriously before taking up the half-eaten mouse in her jaws. As she padded over to the nursery, she relished the feeling of sunlight warming her back. When she entered the den, she was surprised to find Dawnpaw inside.

Her cream-colored sister glanced up from the kits. "Oh, hi," she greeted her with a friendly flick of her tail. "Is that mouse for the kits?"

"Yep." Rosethorn set the fresh-kill down near Rainfoot. "How are you?" she asked the dark gray queen.

"Exhausted!" Rainfoot huffed. "These kits have enough energy to run to the Moontree and back. But I've never been happier," she added, gazing lovingly at her kits, who were lazily wrestling with one another in a separate nest. "They'll be apprentices in no time."

"Yes!" Acornkit sprang to her paws. Her dark ginger pelt was bushed out. "I can't wait much longer. I want to hunt and fight, and I want to see the forest!"

"But I'll be a way better hunter than you," Flashkit boasted, his blue eyes shining playfully. "I'm a lot faster!"

"No, you're not!" Acornkit huffed indignantly.

"Yeah, he is!" Crowkit mewed. "You're a slow slug!"

"I'll show you how quick I can be!" Acornkit hissed, leaping on top of Crowkit. As they wrestled, Flashkit joined in, and the three kits quickly turned into a writhing, squealing mass of fur. Leafkit scrambled away from the fight, her gold eyes narrowed irritably.

Rosethorn purred. "They're certainly lively," she agreed. "And it looks like Crowkit got over that cough he had."

"Yes, the tansy worked quite well," Dawnpaw meowed. "He's feeling fine now."

"Rainfoot, it's nice and sunny outside. Why don't I take the kits out to the clearing so you can take a break?" Rosethorn suggested.

"If you don't mind, that would be fantastic," Rainfoot sighed.

"I'll bring them back before we leave for the Gathering tonight." Rosethorn took a few steps closer to the kits' nest. "Hey, how does a game of moss-ball in the clearing sound?"

Acornkit's tiny, fur-spiked head popped up with a gasp. "Yes!" she squealed, scrambling clumsily out of the nest. "Come on, let's go!"

The she-kit bounded out of the nursery, with her littermates not far behind her. Rosethorn exchanged an amused glance with Dawnpaw.

"I'll get the moss ball," her sister purred. "Then we can play with the kits together."

"Sounds like a great way to spend the afternoon," Rosethorn laughed.

Outside, the four kits were already chasing each other around the clearing, letting out excited yowls. Birchpelt and Juniperfur looked on near the warriors' den, the amusement plain on their faces. Several other warriors were watching the scene, too. The kits didn't seem to mind.

Birchpelt was right when he said Acornkit was a firebrand, Rosethorn thought. *They* all *are!*

Dawnpaw arrived with a fresh bundle of moss, to the kits' delight. "Okay, who wants it first?" she prompted with a twitch of her whiskers.

"Me! Me!" Leafkit squealed, racing up to the medicine cat apprentice.

"Okay, Leafkit," Rosethorn called. "See how long you can keep it away from your siblings!"

"Off you go," Dawnpaw purred. With a flick of her paw, the moss ball was in Leafkit's jaws, and the three other kits were chasing after her like she was a squirrel leaping between the trees.

Rosethorn padded up to Dawnpaw, sitting down beside her. "Did we have that much energy when we were kits?" she mused.

"*You* certainly did," Dawnpaw responded. "I remember that was one of the first reasons that I thought I would be a better medicine cat than a warrior. If I didn't have your energy, then how could I ever keep up with all those patrols and training?"

"Did you ever picture yourself as a warrior, back then?" Rosethorn asked.

"Sometimes," Dawnpaw admitted. "But that certainly changed. And I'm really happy where I am now, anyways."

"A *lot* of things have changed since then," Rosethorn murmured in agreement. Images of Nightshade, Shadowpool, Minnowtail, and Pineclaw clouded her mind.

Dawnpaw seemed to understand what she was implying. She was silent for a long moment, her golden eyes focused intently on the kits. Then she finally spoke, though she didn't look at Rosethorn.

"Why didn't you tell me that Pineclaw was in love with you too? I had no idea until...until the day he died."

"I...I was going to," Rosethorn stuttered. "The thought always crossed my mind, but I would forget before I told you. I don't know why." She stared blankly at her paws. "Besides, it's too late now. He's with StarClan, warm and well-fed and free. I'll join him someday, and then we'll finally be together."

The thought of that filled her with a calming sense of joy. *But I'm not leaving SunClan for a long time yet. I suppose that will have to wait.*

Rosethorn glanced at Dawnpaw and realized that her sister looked

deep in thought. Her eyes were narrowed, and she stared at nothing in particular.

Does she know something I don't? Is it about Pineclaw?

Then a jolt of apprehension shook her as she realized, *I know something about Pineclaw that she doesn't. And I think I need to tell her.*

"Hey, Dawnpaw?"

Her sister looked up, seeming faintly startled. "Yeah?"

"Come with me to the warrior den. There's something I need to show you."

Dawnpaw blinked, obviously intrigued. "Okay."
Rosethorn looked over at the kits, who were now play-fighting in pairs, the moss ball abandoned. "You behave yourselves while we're gone for a moment!" she called.

"We will!" Acornkit yowled, not taking her eyes off of Flashkit, her mock opponent.

"Let's go," Rosethorn mewed to her sister.
As they padded side-by-side towards the den, her anxiety grew. *What will Dawnpaw think when I show her what I found? Will she agree that I need to get revenge, or will she just tell me to let it go?*

Then her anxiety hardened into resolution. *No matter what she says, I know what my choice will be.*

They slipped into the den, which was much warmer than the outside. Rosethorn made certain that no other warriors were dozing inside; then she approached her nest and stuck one paw under the moss, digging for something. She could feel Dawnpaw staring at her with bemusement.

At last she pulled out the clump of fur. With her paw she dragged it across the den floor until it was in front of Dawnpaw.

Her sister peered closely at it, then blinked up at her. "Cat fur," she mewed. "But what's so important about it?"

"Sniff it," Rosethorn replied simply.

Dawnpaw bent over and did so. Her eyes grew wide with surprise. "This belongs to a rogue!" Her head snapped up. "Where did you get this? Why do you have it?"

"During my silent vigil," Rosethorn explained, "I visited Pineclaw's grave. This...this was nearby."

Dawnpaw's fur was bristling. "Was some rogue walking around his grave?" she growled. "How would they even get that far into our territory? I swear on StarClan, if those fox-hearts defiled *any* part of that grave, I'll—"

"No, Dawnpaw. That's not what happened." Rosethorn lifted her tail to stop her feisty sister from losing her temper.

"Then what did?"

"Listen, it's going to sound stupid, and you might not even believe me, but...I've been having dreams. Really strange ones. At first I didn't think anything of them, but then...they started happening over and over, even more frequently. Then I realized they meant something very important."

Dawnpaw eyed her suspiciously. "You're not saying you think you should be a medicine cat, are you?"

Rosethorn sighed. "No. Could you stop jumping to conclusions and let me explain all this to you, please?"

Faint surprise in her expression, Dawnpaw nodded.

"The dreams," she began, "started out like any other. The very first time I had the dream, which was back when I was still a young apprentice, I had been hunting a huge mouse. But when I pounced on it and looked down, it...it wasn't a mouse anymore. It was a cat. Rather small, with black-and-white fur and big amber eyes. A tom."

Dawnpaw glanced quickly down at the piece of fur, understanding lighting her gaze.

"I didn't know why, but the moment our eyes met, I had this *burning* hatred running through me," Rosethorn went on. "I could feel it in my chest, in my claws, in my veins. It was like I knew this cat had done something to hurt me or the Clan. I had no idea what it was, but I wanted him dead for it anyway."

"So...what would happen next, in every dream?" Dawnpaw prompted.

"Nothing, really...my vision would cloud over and then I would wake up." Rosethorn made sure to leave out the parts where she brutally attacked the rogue tom. *I don't want Dawnpaw to think I'm some kind of monster.*

"Okay, so you were having these dreams for moons," Dawnpaw meowed. "And now you've found this bit of fur, and you think it's connected to those dreams?"

"I think that fur belongs to the cat I dreamed about."

"But how is that possible?" Dawnpaw looked utterly bewildered. "You've never met that cat before, not in person."

"You've never met cats from StarClan while they were alive," Rosethorn retorted. "But you can still see them anyway."

"But this is way different!"

"Okay, this isn't the point." Rosethorn leaned in closer, willing her sister to listen to her and believe her. "Dawnpaw, *I know who killed Pineclaw.* It was this cat!"

Dawnpaw was silent, staring at her with an array of emotions—surprise, disbelief, doubt. "H-how could you possibly know that for sure?" she stammered.

"I just know. I know there's no reason for you to believe me, but I had to tell you." Rosethorn shuffled her paws in the dirt. "I think StarClan was sending me those dreams to warn me of what was going to happen. They allowed me to realize who killed Pineclaw because they want me to get revenge."

Dawnpaw shook her head slowly. "Do you realize how insane this sounds?"

"Yes, I do," Rosethorn scoffed ruefully. "But I've never been so certain of anything before. This black-and-white cat is the one who murdered my mentor."

"I don't mean to be rude, but why would StarClan be sending a warrior special dreams? That's a medicine cat's job."

Rosethorn shook her head helplessly. "I don't understand that either."

"Then how would you even know for sure that this isn't just some weird coincidence?"

"I had the same dream multiple times, about the same cat. And his fur was near Pineclaw's grave. It all adds up, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, but..." Dawnpaw looked dismayed, like she wanted to believe it but just couldn't. "There's no *solid* proof of this. We shouldn't jump to conclusions about something so serious."

Rosethorn lashed her tail furiously. "Then what am I supposed to do? Just sit around and pretend to be happy about letting that rogue get away with this? I can't do that. If there's a lead, no matter how crazy it might be, I have to follow it." Her heart raced with barely contained adrenaline. She wished she could sprint out of camp, straight to the Twolegplace, and tear open the throat of the cat who had ruined her life.

"We don't *have* to place the blame on one cat. The rogues as a whole are to blame for all of this." Dawnpaw narrowed her eyes. "I want peace for SunClan; I don't want fighting. But I don't think there's any other option now. These rogues have stolen our prey, killed one of our warriors, and nearly killed you more than once. It's about time we taught them a lesson. *All* of them, because that black-and-white cat is not the only one who caused trouble for us."

Rosethorn thought of Poppy and Fauna, the two she-cats who had hunted on their territory and nearly got away with it. She thought

of the big tabby tom that she had fought twice as an apprentice. He had given her the shoulder wound that nearly cost her life, and had gotten close to jumping Pineclaw when no other cats were around. She thought of the ginger she-cat that had pinned Cherryfur, and who might have killed her if she hadn't been there to help. And she thought of Zodiac, the swift, hotheaded leader of them all, the one behind everything that had happened to SunClan. Each and every one of them—not just the cat who murdered Pineclaw—had done something to wrong the Clan, not just her.

Dawnpaw's right, Rosethorn realized. *They all need to pay.*

"You're right," she meowed to her sister. "We have to do something, and fast. Before they can hurt us any more than they already have."

"I agree," Dawnpaw responded. "You know what? We need to talk to Adderstar, before we leave for the Gathering."

"Great idea," Rosethorn agreed. "But not on our own. You should get Grayleaf, and I'll find Beestripe. They all need to hear this before any decisions are made."

"Okay." Dawnpaw stood up, stiff with determination. "Let's get Rainfoot's kits back in the nursery, and then we'll get started." She spun around and bounded out of the den. Rosethorn hastily shoved the clump of fur back under her nest, and followed her.

Her heart was still racing, but not with rage anymore. It was with anticipation.

The fate of those rogues rests in Adderstar's decision. And I hope he does the right thing. Because if he doesn't, then I will.

Chapter 31

With Beestripe, Dawnpaw, and Grayleaf flanking her, Rosethorn crossed the camp towards Adderstar's den. Cats who were soaking up the weak evening sunlight stared at them curiously as they walked. Rosethorn suppressed her wry amusement. *I must look pretty important, with the Clan deputy and medicine cats walking beside me!*

The four cats pushed through the frail vines that grew over the cave's mouth. Inside the den, Adderstar was crouched near the wall covered in scratches, idly examining his claws. He looked up with surprise, his flaming eyes glowing in the dim light.

"This ought to be interesting," he murmured half to himself, scanning the cats who had come into his den. Louder he prompted, "So what brings all of you here? Is this about the Gathering?"

"No, Adderstar," Rosethorn meowed, dipping her head respectfully as she spoke. "This is about something else."

"Grayleaf and I don't know what she has to say," Beestripe admitted, "but she insisted that our opinions were needed too."

"This must be important, then." Adderstar narrowed his eyes, focusing on Rosethorn. "Speak."

Suddenly rather nervous, Rosethorn took a deep breath to steady herself. "I think we've spent far too much time ignoring the rogues," she began. "Only because they hadn't been a big problem back then. But now they are. They think they have free reign over our territory. They steal our prey, kill—" Her voice cracked, and her belly tightened with grief. She forced herself to go on. "—kill one of our warriors, and think they can get away with all of it. But we *can't* let them. They need to be taught a lesson they won't forget: that SunClan is *not* to be messed with!"

Adderstar's ears were pricked with interest. Clearly he hadn't

expected a young warrior to approach him with this opinion. "You're saying we should fight back?"

"Absolutely," Rosethorn said. "You must agree, right? Every moment we let them think they have power over us is a moment they could spend hunting our food or harming our cats. We can't let that happen!"

"I do agree." The SunClan leader turned to Beestripe and Grayleaf, who sat side by side. "What do you think about this?" he asked.

Rosethorn pressed closer to Dawnpaw, praying the deputy and medicine cat would agree. *If they don't want to go along with this, then neither will Adderstar!*

"Well, it does seem reasonable that we need to teach these rogues a lesson," Grayleaf mewed. "And I want payback for Pineclaw's death as much as any cat. But," she added, glancing at Rosethorn, "I'm just not sure this is the right time for a fight. Leaf-bare is upon us now, and we can't risk any more serious injuries, or deaths. We need all the hunters we can get."

"But what will those hunters do when there's no prey to hunt, because the rogues have taken it all?" Rosethorn challenged her. "Starvation is long-term, and there's no retreating from it. It would kill more cats than a battle. And again, things are bound to get worse the longer we let the rogues stay here!"

My point is reasonable, she thought frustratedly. *Why doesn't Grayleaf think I have the right idea?*

"That's true," Beestripe meowed. "Injuries aren't the only thing we have to worry about. Prey in leaf-bare is scarce enough without prey-stealing rogues on our tails. We can't let any food slip away from us."

Rosethorn nodded, relieved that someone else was on her side.

"Yes, starvation could also mean sickness in the Clan," Dawnpaw spoke up quietly. She seemed shy about voicing her opinion in front of so many high-status cats, which confused Rosethorn. *She spoke*

out of turn to an entire Gathering. Why would this bother her? "I agree that injuries at the start of leaf-bare are a bad thing, but whitecough and greencough are worse. At least having more prey will make the Clan stronger."

"I suppose you're right," Grayleaf murmured.

Rosethorn breathed a quiet sigh of relief. *She's coming around.*

"You've all made some valid points," Adderstar rumbled. "There are several things to consider here." His long tail was wrapped over his huge paws, but the tip was flicking thoughtfully. Eventually he looked at Rosethorn again. "If we were to attack the rogues," he prompted, "when would we do it?"

Rosethorn blinked, surprised that this wasn't something the leader wanted to decide for himself. "Er...maybe tomorrow, or the day after. It might seem too soon, but with cats like these, we can't waste any more time."

Adderstar nodded slowly. Rosethorn thought from his expression that he agreed with her, and felt a surge of hopeful pride.

"I'll think about this, and I'll announce my decision during a Clan meeting tomorrow morning," he meowed briskly. "You're all dismissed. Beestripe, please start getting the Gathering patrol together."

"I'll do that," the deputy mewed on his way out of the den, flicking his tail in farewell.

Rosethorn turned to leave, but froze when Adderstar called her name. She turned her head back to look at him, and was surprised to find his gaze round with sympathy.

"You're not asking for this simply because you want to avenge Pineclaw, right?" he asked her softly.

The question threw Rosethorn off guard, and she didn't know how to respond for a moment.

Then she rasped, "I have the Clan's best interests at heart, I

promise."

"I know what you're going through." Adderstar's eyes clouded. "Really, I do. I lost a mate, many moons ago, back when I was still deputy to Skystar, the leader of SunClan before me."

Rosethorn blinked, stunned. She'd had no idea. *Perhaps the Clan doesn't like to talk about it.* "May I ask how she died?" she meowed quietly.

"We were fighting MoonClan on their territory. One too many border skirmishes had led to a full-scale fight," Adderstar recalled sadly. "The MoonClan warriors forced us up against the Thunderpath near our border with them. My mate—her name was Paledawn—was grappling with a MoonClan warrior. He saw a monster approaching, and..."

Adderstar shook his head, unable to continue speaking. Rosethorn didn't know what to say. *His mate had been murdered. He really does know what I'm going through.*

"The following leaf-bare that MoonClan tom was killed by greencough," Adderstar rasped. "But knowing he was dead didn't make me feel any better. And that's what I need you to understand, Rosethorn." He stared imploringly at her, eyes burning into her pelt. "Revenge is not always the answer to grief. It is okay to grieve, but do not let your feelings take control of you. Cats do unspeakable things when they are driven by grief."

Rosethorn's throat felt dry and swollen; saying just one word felt like an impossible task. Her dreams of the black-and-white tom felt fresh in her mind now, reminding her that StarClan knew of the killer she could become. *Cats do unspeakable things when they are driven by grief.* Would killing Pineclaw's murderer really clear her conscience?

She didn't want to think about that, not now. Instead she dipped her head once more to the SunClan leader. "T-thank you for sharing this with me." With that, she padded shakily out of the den.

Rosethorn started with surprise when she realized that Minnowtail

was standing outside the cave. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. *Were you eavesdropping? How long were you standing there?*

"Is Adderstar in there?" the silver she-cat asked.

Rosethorn's whiskers twitched. "Of course. Why else would I have been in there?"

"Right. Sorry, I can't really focus right now." Minnowtail winced. "I've got a bad bellyache. Must've been something I ate earlier today. I'm telling Adderstar I can't go to the Gathering."

"Oh. Okay." Rosethorn continued walking. "Hope you feel better."

The Minnowtail I know would never *let some old bellyache keep her from a Gathering. What's going on with her?*

More suspicious than ever, Rosethorn spotted Nightshade grooming himself outside the warrior den. She felt reluctant to ask him questions about Minnowtail after what happened the last time she tried. But she only wanted to know if she had been acting ill during the day. *She could be faking this. But why...?*

"Hi, Nightshade," she mewed, trotting up to her friend. "Coming to the Gathering?"

"Yep. You?"

"Yeah. But apparently Minnowtail's not. She says she's got a bellyache and wants to stay behind this time."

"Really?" Nightshade glanced up from his grooming. "She's been energetic all day. It didn't seem like she was ill."

"Weird." Rosethorn settled beside him, silently glad she was getting somewhere. "Maybe she just doesn't want to come? That doesn't seem like Minnowtail, though."

Nightshade didn't reply. Rosethorn glanced at him, and found him staring back at her with narrowed eyes.

"You're not going to start again, are you?" His tone was cold, and it

made Rosethorn wince visibly.

"No, Nightshade. I'm not. Am I not allowed to be worried when my Clanmate is acting strange?"

"I don't want you to make a big deal out of nothing."

Rosethorn almost said, *It's not nothing.* But she held her tongue. Instead she sighed, "Don't get mad at me again, please. You don't understand how happy I am that we're friends again, and I don't want to lose you again."

Nightshade's expression didn't change. He sighed. "I'm glad we're still friends, too."

He got to his paws and padded away, leaving Rosethorn by herself.

In any other situation, she would have been happy to hear that from Nightshade. But the way he had spat out the word *friends* like a bitter herb made her heart feel like it was going to break all over again.

No matter what had happened between them in the past, Nightshade still wanted to be more than just friends. And Rosethorn didn't think she would ever be ready to love another cat the way she had loved Pineclaw.

And when our friendship comes down to that, what will happen to us then?

Chapter 32

The dark sky was only littered with a few stars tonight, but the full moon still hung big and bright, casting faint light upon the SunClan cats heading for the Gathering. Rosethorn walked at the back of the group, beside Dawnpaw.

"I can hardly wait until Adderstar makes his decision," Rosethorn meowed to her sister. She made sure to keep her voice low so her Clanmates wouldn't hear her and wonder what was going on.

"Me neither," Dawnpaw responded. "I have a feeling something big is about to happen, regardless of what Adderstar does."

"Well, you *are* a medicine cat," Rosethorn said. "You can tell with these kinds of things."

"I don't know if that's always a good thing." Dawnpaw's eyes were wide with anxiety.

"Hey." Rosethorn licked her sister's ear affectionately. "No matter what, I'm sure we're going to be fine."

Dawnpaw glanced at her. "I'm glad to see you're back to your normal optimistic self," she purred.

Rosethorn huffed. "It's an effort," she admitted. "There's still so much going on. Nightshade is still upset with me."

Dawnpaw blinked, the surprise plain on her face. "But I see you two talking all the time. I thought you were okay now."

Rosethorn shook her head helplessly. "He...he still loves me. I'm sure of it. He wants me to forget about Pineclaw and be with him instead, but I just can't do that. I'm not sure I ever could."

Dawnpaw murmured with sympathy. "He can't help the way he feels. You can't blame him for that."

"I don't. I just worry that, if we aren't mates, then he won't want to talk to me at all. Feelings like that don't just disappear. I know that better than most," she added quietly.

"Just give him some more time," Dawnpaw mewed. "Perhaps he'll realize that he should appreciate you as a friend instead of being upset that you aren't mates."

"Maybe." Rosethorn wasn't convinced. Anxiety gnawed at her belly all the way to the Moontree. *Why can't things ever be simple anymore?* she thought despairingly. *I feel so confused, so lost...*

Pineclaw would know what to make of all this.

Rosethorn pushed the thought away as familiar grieving pains pricked her heart like the sharpest brambles. *He's gone now,* she told herself. *You have to figure this out on your own.*

She thought of Adderstar and the story he told her that no other cat spoke of. *Do not let your feelings take control of you. Cats do unspeakable things when they are driven by grief.* The memory of those words chilled Rosethorn to the bone. *Would I really kill a cat in cold blood simply for Pineclaw's sake? He wouldn't want that.*

And yet she wasn't certain that knowing what Pineclaw would have wanted would stop her from getting revenge. *He hadn't wanted to be murdered, either, and look what happened anyway.*

The Gathering patrol pushed their way through the ring of bushes that guarded the Moontree and the clearing around it. Instantly Rosethorn felt the eyes of three other Clans boring into her. Suddenly she realized how much SunClan had to share with the other Clans. So much had happened; Pineclaw had been killed, and she and Nightshade had been made warriors. *It feels like it's been way more than a moon since the last Gathering.*

Rosethorn glanced sideways at her sister, who had suddenly perked up. "What is it?"

"There's a new cat with the other medicine cats, sitting beside Leafstripe!" Dawnpaw exclaimed excitedly. "I think she's found her

new apprentice."

"Yes, I think so too." Grayleaf padded toward Dawnpaw. "Come, let's go say hello."

"See you later, Rosethorn," Dawnpaw mewed as she followed her mentor away. Rosethorn waved her tail in farewell. Then she looked around, wondering what she should do now.
WaterClan looked calm and mildly friendly as usual; several MoonClan warriors were mingling among them. Most of FireClan was keeping to themselves, casting looks at SunClan that were not quite hostile, but they were certainly close.

Rosethorn was just thinking that she would go and talk to some MoonClan or WaterClan warriors, when an ever-so-slightly familiar meow caught her attention.

"Rosepaw! It's good to see you."

She turned to see a black tom trotting towards her, his amber eyes glowing and his tail high in the air.

"Shadetail!" she exclaimed. "It's been a while." She remembered the FireClan warrior from when his rebellious apprentice, Sootpaw, had intentionally crossed SunClan's border. *Even I never got into that much trouble when I was an apprentice!*

"It certainly has," Shadetail agreed. "How have things been in SunClan?"

"Well, I was made a warrior not long ago." Rosethorn puffed out her chest proudly. "My name is Rosethorn now." *Pineclaw chose it for me,* she added silently.

"Oh, congratulations!" Shadetail purred. Then he looked around. "Where's Pineclaw? I don't see him anywhere. He *is* here, right?"

Rosethorn flinched, her heart skipping several beats. *He has no idea...*

"H-he's not here," she whispered. "Pineclaw...Pineclaw is dead."

"Oh, StarClan, no!" Shadetail looked numb with shock. "What happened to him?"

Rosethorn stared at her paws. "A rogue from the Twolegplace killed him." *If I had gotten to him in time, maybe he would still be here to be proud that his apprentice is a warrior at last.*

"That's horrible," Shadetail rasped. "I'm so sorry, Rosethorn. I knew Pineclaw since our first Gathering as apprentices. I know he was a wonderful warrior, and an even better mentor to you."

Rosethorn nodded mutely. *I loved him.*

Desperate for a change of subject, she asked, "So where is Sootpaw? I hope he didn't get into more trouble and had to stay behind."

Shadetail was still sobered by the news she had brought him, but his eyes lit up with pride. "Actually, quite the opposite," he meowed. "Soot*fang* is a warrior now. He got over his little mutinous phase, and is now a warrior FireClan can be proud of."

"That's wonderful," Rosethorn purred. "I'm glad you snapped him into shape!"

Shadetail laughed. "It certainly took a lot of effort. But he's worked hard to get here. He deserves this." Suddenly he glanced around as if making sure no other cat was listening. Then he mewed, "I'm sorry if this offends you, but how much longer are the rogues going to be intruding on your territory? It's been moons; hasn't Adderstar done something?"

Rosethorn twitched her whiskers irritably. Not at Shadetail, but at Adderstar. *That's a good question. How much longer will Adderstar sit around and do nothing while these rogues pick us off one by one? I suppose we'll find out tomorrow.*

"I'm sorry if this offends *you,*" she answered coolly, "but I think Adderstar has been making sure FireClan doesn't cause any more trouble at our borders."

Shadetail ducked his head, obviously embarrassed. "Right," he muttered. "Some of my Clanmates can be a little bad-tempered

sometimes. But I'm still proud to be counted among them. They're good and very loyal Clanmates."

"I'm sure they are," Rosethorn sympathized. "I just wish they would see reason. We weren't the only ones breaking the code when the kits snuck away and were attacked by that fox And *they* were doing it on purpose; the kits were too young to really understand that they were breaking the code."

"That's just how some Clan cats are, I guess." Shadetail's ear twitched wryly. "Always looking for some way to prove that they're superior to the other Clans."

Rosethorn nodded her agreement, recalling the ginger FireClan she-cat that had started the conflict between the two Clans.

"So how *are* Rainfoot's kits doing?" Shadetail prompted. "I hope they've recovered from the incident with the fox."

"Oh, they're doing just fine," Rosethorn chuckled. "It's almost like it never even happened. They're a pawful, that's for sure, but they'll be apprentices in just a couple more moons."

"Do you think Adderstar will let you mentor one?"

"I hope so. I like Acornkit. She reminds me a lot of myself when I was a kit, so perhaps I'd be a good mentor for her."

"What's she like?"

"She has enough energy to sprint from our camp to the Moontree and back. She's eager to learn all about Clan life, and loves being helpful whenever she can." Fondly Rosethorn added, "She loves listening to the elders' stories because they say she keeps them company. It makes her feel useful."

"That's sweet," Shadetail purred. "Acornkit sounds like she'll make a very fine warrior."

"I think so too."

A commanding yowl from the branches of the Moontree put an end

to all conversations. The cats in the crowd raised their heads to look at Juniperstar, the MoonClan leader.

"Let this Gathering begin," the graceful she-cat meowed. "MoonClan has much to share with you. First of all, Spotheart's kits have turned six moons old and become apprentices: Mallowpaw, Yellowpaw, and Icepaw, who has chosen to be a medicine cat apprenticed to Leafstripe."

"Mallowpaw! Yellowpaw! Icepaw!" The cheers rose up from every Clan, especially MoonClan themselves. Rosethorn craned her neck as she chanted, spotting Icepaw among the medicine cats. She was a gray tabby, and her green eyes sparkled with shy pride as she listened to the Clans calling her name. *She looks a little nervous. I hope Dawnpaw makes her feel welcomed.*

"In other news, Skypaw and Lightpaw have become warriors," Juniperstar continued. "They are now Skypelt and Lightwhisker. MoonClan is strong heading into this leaf-bare."

"Skypelt! Lightwhisker!" the Clans chanted. Rosethorn was happy that no hostility between Clans was ruining these cats' special moments. *I hope it's the same for Nightshade and I,* she thought. *And I hope that everyone is respectful when Pineclaw's death is announced. I swear, if some FireClan mouse-brain makes a comment about it...*

She stopped herself before she could complete the thought. Juniperstar sat back on her haunches and nodded briskly, ending her turn. Troutstar then stepped forward to give his report.

"WaterClan is strong as well," he rumbled. "However, the rivers began to freeze over earlier than they usually do. One of our apprentices, Gorsepaw, was fishing and fell into the water. It froze over him, and he drowned. All of WaterClan mourns his loss, and we hope he can be the warrior he dreamed of being in StarClan."

Rosethorn murmured in sympathy along with many other cats. Shadetail bowed his head and whispered, "That's horrible. Poor Gorsepaw."

"I'm sure he's happy now, in StarClan," Rosethorn comforted him.

She couldn't help thinking of how Pineclaw was doing as she spoke. *Is* he *happy? Does he miss me? Is he watching me now?*

"Precautions have been taken to make sure nothing like this happens again," Troutstar finished. He backed into the shadows of the few leaves still left on the Moontree, concluding his report.

Adderstar stood, stepping out of the darkness. Amberstar—who was perched on a branch just above him—looked irritated, but said nothing.

"SunClan has also suffered a loss," he began. "Pineclaw, one of our young warriors, died not long ago. Our medicine cats determined it was something he had eaten, a sickness in the prey. But all other prey has been thoroughly checked, including freshly caught things, and we are certain the sickness did not spread. But all of SunClan will miss Pineclaw dearly."

Rosethorn stared at her leader with bewilderment. *Pineclaw didn't die like that!*

She realized Shadetail was watching her. "Perhaps he lied so the other Clans didn't think you were weak," the FireClan tom suggested in a low voice.

"SunClan isn't weak, anyways," Rosethorn snapped. She felt ashamed. *Why didn't I realize that our Clan could seem weak if they knew we had let the rogues on our territory? I made a big mistake...*

She glanced sideways at Shadetail once he looked away. *I hope he's as decent of a warrior as I think he is,* she thought darkly. *He'll get what he deserves if he uses this against SunClan!*

"I don't believe the sickness has spread, either." Juniperstar raised her head to look at Adderstar. "MoonClan's patrols haven't seen any sick prey on our side of the border." She leaned forward to look at Amberstar. "Have you seen anything like this?"

Amberstar shook her head briskly. "Nothing. We are safe."

"Then that concludes that," Adderstar mewed. "In better news, we have two new warriors to welcome to our ranks. Nightshade, and

Rosethorn, who was Pineclaw's apprentice."

"Rosethorn! Nightshade!" Rosethorn's pelt tingled happily as she heard Dawnpaw, Quickstorm, and Patchflower all yowling her warrior name, along with several other cats. Although she noticed with irritation that no FireClan cats cheered at all. Even Shadetail said nothing, although he shot an apologetic glance at her. *Probably just making sure Amberstar doesn't line her nest with his fur for supporting SunClan cats,* she sniffed. *I can't believe they still haven't dropped this yet. At this point it doesn't matter who was in the right that day as long as it doesn't turn into a worthless battle.*

Rosethorn mentally shook herself. She wasn't about to let a bunch of FireClan cats holding petty grudges ruin her mood. Instead she proudly raised her head, relishing the cheers of her and Nightshade's names for the brief instant they lasted.

Adderstar nodded, looking pleased, and sat back down on his branch in the Moontree. Amberstar stood, her fiery eyes glowing as vibrantly as the full moon.

"Mouseclaw's kits have been born. They were a little late, but are growing well. Their names are Redkit, Squirrelkit, and Quailkit. And our apprentice, Sootpaw, has become Sootfang."

The Clans began calling Sootfang's name. This time, however, Rosethorn noticed that several SunClan cats were silent. Forestfire glared disdainfully at the FireClan cats; Hazelfrost was watching Amberstar with undisguised fury; Ebonypelt, Shinefur, and Patchflower glanced around the crowd doubtfully as if debating what to do.

Rosethorn still chanted Sootfang's name. *He's not responsible for the attitude of those other FireClan cats, and I won't treat him like he is.*

The cheers died down, and Amberstar—after casting another reproachful look at Adderstar—yowled, "Now that every leader has spoken, this Gathering is concluded. May StarClan light your paths."

"And yours," Adderstar responded smoothly as the cats below began to talk quietly once more. Amberstar hissed with obvious irritation,

and abruptly leaped down from her branch. Rosethorn stifled an amused purr. Adderstar clearly knew that the FireClan leader was still upset over the border dispute. *She doesn't appreciate his niceties!*

"I suppose I should head back to my Clanmates." Shadetail stood up and turned to face her.

"And I should get back to mine," she replied. "It was good seeing you. Maybe we'll talk again at the next Gathering."

"Sure," Shadetail agreed. "And again, I'm really sorry about Pineclaw. I know he is honored by his Clan, and I'll miss him."

"I'll miss him too," Rosethorn murmured. "He was a great warrior, and a great mentor." *And he could have been an even better mate.*

Shadetail looked like he was about to say something, but froze when a FireClan warrior stopped briskly in front of him. Rosethorn was surprised to see it was the mottled orange she-cat she had met at the border. Her dark amber eyes flitted over her with hostility.

"FireClan is leaving, so you'd best hurry up," she growled. "We have better things to to than talking with cats like *her*." She lashed her tail in Rosethorn's direction, then stalked away to where Amberstar was rounding up her Clan to leave.

Rosethorn hissed under her breath. Shadetail looked at her worriedly.

"That's Maplefang. She has strong opinions sometimes. Don't mind her, please."

"I should get going," Rosethorn growled. She whipped around and bounded towards Beestripe, who was waiting patiently for Adderstar along with the rest of SunClan's Gathering patrol. The SunClan leader was chatting politely with Troutstar. *Perhaps it's about Gorsepaw and Pineclaw.*

Rosethorn sat down with a huff beside Patchflower. Her mother quickly noticed that something was wrong. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Rosethorn sighed. "FireClan just gets on my nerves

sometimes."

"I know," Patchflower mewed, licking her daughter's ear comfortingly. "Don't pay any mind to them. Their own opinions are all that matters to them."

Rosethorn didn't respond. Her mind was now on the battle between SunClan and the rogues that might be tomorrow. She prayed that the conflict between SunClan and FireClan would not deter Adderstar from taking the fight to the rogues. They murdered Pineclaw. They were stealing prey that was even more precious now that leaf-bare was here. Justice had to be served, and fast. If they didn't fight back against the rogues, only StarClan knew what they would do to SunClan next.

Chapter 33

Rosethorn's eyes blinked open groggily, and she winced irritably as cold, bright sunlight quickly blinded her. She shivered, wishing briefly that she was a senior warrior so she could sleep in the warmer corners of the warrior den.

Then she realized that the chill she felt was on her fur, coming from her left side. She lifted her head curiously. Minnowtail was fast asleep beside her, curled up in a tight silver ball. Her flank rose and fell steadily, her breath like tiny clouds in the chilly air.

Rosethorn's nose twitched. Minnowtail didn't *smell* like she'd been sleeping. Her pelt smelled of wind, and the forest. *Perhaps she's been out on an early patrol. Did I wake up late?*

A jolt passed through her. Had she missed Adderstar's announcement? Was SunClan not going to battle the rogues after all?

Panicked, Rosethorn scrambled out of her nest and bounded out of the den. She looked up, narrowing her eyes against the daylight, and found that the sky was a pale blue, but the sun was still slowly rising.

Birchpelt was lying beside Rainfoot near the fresh-kill pile, washing her ears. Both cats looked up when they saw Rosethorn.

"Is something wrong?" Birchpelt asked.

Rosethorn shook her head. "Has Adderstar called a meeting yet?"

Rainfoot and Birchpelt exchanged a confused glance. "No," the latter meowed. "Why would he call a meeting?"

Rosethorn cursed silently. She had forgotten that the rest of the Clan had no idea what might happen today. "I overheard him talking to Beestripe yesterday, before the Gathering. He said he's

thinking about taking a battle patrol to fight the rogues and get revenge for...for everything they've done." She avoided saying Pineclaw's name in particular. It wasn't the *whole* truth, but Adderstar *was* debating this.

"Really?" Rainfoot's eyes rounded with worry. "I don't know if the beginning of leaf-bare is the best time for an all-out battle."

"How big is the patrol going to be?" Birchpelt asked. "If most of our warriors get injured, how will we hunt? I don't want Rainfoot or my kits to starve. I can understand why Adderstar would want to do this, but it seems a little unreasonable right now."

Rosethorn stifled a wince. The battle had been her and Dawnpaw's idea; it hurt that she was being criticized, even if Birchpelt and Rainfoot weren't doing it intentionally.

"He might not do it," she mewed tightly. "I don't know what he'll decide. But I think it's a good idea. After all, even if we don't fight, warriors could get hurt anyway. Look what happened to Pineclaw."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Rosethorn regretted them. *That was harsh. I shouldn't have said that.*

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "That was a rash thing to say."

"Don't apologize," Rainfoot meowed kindly. "No cat can blame you for grieving. And we all want to avenge Pineclaw's death as much as you do."

Oh, I don't think you do, Rosethorn thought darkly, recalling her violent dreams of killing the rogue who murdered her mate-to-be.

Out loud she meowed, "It's all up to Adderstar. We'll just have to wait for his decision."

Rustling from the warriors' den caught the trio's attention. Shadowpool emerged from the entrance, guiding a very groggy-looking Minnowtail outside.

"Come on," he was meowing with amusement. "You didn't even come to the Gathering last night. Why are you so tired?"

"Didn't sleep well," Minnowtail mumbled in reply, narrowing her eyes against the sun. Together the two siblings padded towards the nursery.

"They're probably wanting to visit the kits." Rainfoot got to her paws. "I should go and make sure they behave. See you later." She gave Birchpelt's ear an affectionate lick and bounded away.

The pale ginger tom sighed, staring after her. "I don't know how she does it," he mewed fondly. "Now that the kits are starting to eat fresh-kill, she's gone back to some of her warrior duties. But even then she has time and energy to spend with them. She's such a wonderful cat. I'm lucky to have her, and so are the kits."

Rosethorn pushed away the painful feelings of longing that tugged at her like brambles. *Pineclaw and I could have been close like that. We could have raised kits together.*

"They'll turn out to be fine warriors, I'm sure," she agreed. "And they'll have you and Rainfoot to thank for that."

Birchpelt turned back to her. "Pardon the change of subject, but don't you think Minnowtail has been acting a little strange lately?"

Rosethorn blinked, surprised for a few heartbeats. Then she asked, "How so?" *Maybe I'm not the only one after all.*

"Well, first of all, it's not like her at all to miss a Gathering," Birchpelt began. "Even if her belly was aching like she says it was. And then, just now, she seemed exhausted when she had the entire night to sleep." His blue eyes glittered worriedly. "I hope she isn't sick. Leaf-bare's only just begun!"

"Surely Grayleaf or Dawnpaw would have noticed something was wrong if she was really sick," Rosethorn meowed carefully. "Maybe something else is going on." She still wasn't certain that Minnowtail was somehow disloyal to SunClan. But it was better to be safe than sorry. *Perhaps Birchpelt would agree with me about that.*

Before she could bring the idea up, Adderstar's yowl sliced through the calm air. "Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey

gather beneath the Cliffrock for a Clan meeting!"

"It's time!" Rosethorn gasped, springing to her paws.

"Let's go see what his decision was," Birchpelt murmured.

Since the morning patrols had been finished, most of the Clan was already in the clearing; they began to migrate towards the Cliffrock to hear what Adderstar had to say. Birchpelt ran over to Rainfoot, who had settled just outside the nursery along with their four kits, who stared wide-eyed up at the SunClan leader. Minnowtail and Shadowpool sat side by side, with the former looking much more alert than she had before.

Shinefur, Willowstripe, and Patchflower sat together in a group, while Juniperfur, Quickstorm, and Duskheart took up space nearby. Robinfeather and Deerdapple found spots next to Nightshade and Thumpstep. Thrushtail and Cherryfur sat closest to the Cliffrock itself. Grayleaf and Dawnpaw emerged from the medicine cat den and settled at the back of the crowd. Rosethorn noticed how anxious her sister looked, while the look on Grayleaf's face was grim.

Rosethorn ended up taking a spot towards the center of the group. She raised her head to stare at Adderstar, grateful that the sun hadn't risen high enough to where it blinded her with its light.

"Cats of SunClan," the leader began. "I have a very important announcement to make. It has come to my attention that many of my cats believe we have let the rogues get away with their trespassing for far too long." His striking eyes flitted over Rosethorn, then lifted to look at Dawnpaw.

"I agree with this. And so I have decided that SunClan will fight back against these rogues. Today."

Rosethorn's heart lurched with anticipation, and she let out a breath of relief. *This is what we have to do. We have to show these rogues that SunClan is not helpless. They can't do this to us anymore!*

Around her, several cats gasped with utter surprise, while others

caterwauled their agreement and support.

"I will gather a patrol of warriors—any cat willing to fight is welcome—and we will go to the Twolegplace," Adderstar yowled. "We'll find their camp and launch a surprise attack on them. Today we will show these prey-stealing murderers what happens when you harm SunClan!"

Rosethorn was overjoyed to hear almost the entire Clan yowl their agreements.

"Drive them off our land!"

"Show them what SunClan warriors are made of!"

"We will avenge Pineclaw!"

"Adderstar!" The yowls died down as Thumpstep's call rose above them. "I have an idea. Remember the first time we fought the rogues? We met their leader. I think her name was Zodiac. Perhaps if we kill her, then the rest will scatter."

Adderstar nodded thoughtfully. "A good point. I'll have some warriors that were in that first battle come along, so we'll know Zodiac when we see her." He bent over the edge of the Cliffrock to look down at his deputy. "Beestripe, start organizing the battle patrol. I want, at most, half of the warriors on it. We don't know for sure how many cats we'll be fighting, but we also shouldn't leave the camp defenseless."

"I'm on it," Beestripe meowed briskly.

"Then this Clan meeting is dismissed." Almost right after Adderstar had finished speaking, the clearing erupted with sounds of eager warriors trying to join the battle patrol. Rosethorn quickly joined them. *I wouldn't forgive myself if I missed out on a battle that I pretty much instigated.*

As she pushed through the throng of cats that stood before her, she noticed Minnowtail march up to Beestripe. The silver tabby's eyes were dark and unreadable.

"Beestripe, I'd like to join the patrol," she meowed.

The Clan deputy stared at her with slight concern. "Are you sure you should be fighting? Yesterday you had a bellyache, and you didn't sleep very well either. Maybe you're coming down with some —"

"I'm okay, honestly!" Minnowtail retorted. "I can fight as well as any cat here. And besides, I was on that first battle patrol. I know what Zodiac looks like, and I can keep an eye out for her. Please, let me come!"

Rosethorn thought the young warrior looked awfully desperate to be on the patrol. *Well, she does love to fight. And she has as much reason to hate the rogues as the rest of the Clan.*

Plus, her eagerness to fight for SunClan *did* make her seem much more loyal. Perhaps she was wrong about Minnowtail after all. She hoped so, for the sake of her friendship with Nightshade. And for SunClan itself; a traitor within their own borders was something they simply couldn't handle right now.

"Well...alright, if you're so sure," Beestripe conceded. "But you'd better not be hiding something just to be part of this battle. We need *able* fighters, for your sake and for SunClan's."

"I know. I've never been more ready for a battle like this." Minnowtail flexed her claws and narrowed her eyes.

Rosethorn walked up to stand beside her. "I want to be on the patrol too," she meowed quietly. "Those cats killed my mentor. He taught me everything I know; if I'm even half the warrior he was, it's because of him. The rogues *will* pay for his murder, and I'd like to help with that."

Beestripe gazed at her, his yellow eyes dark with sympathy. "Well said," he responded. "Very well, you will be part of the patrol as well."

"Thank you." As Rosethorn turned to walk away, she noticed Minnowtail staring reproachfully at her. Her eyes flickered away so

quickly that it almost seemed like she'd imagined it. But she knew what she'd seen.

What's up with her? Is she mad at me for wanting to avenge Pineclaw's death, or something? Rosethorn felt puzzled. *Even someone like Minnowtail wouldn't feel that way.*

She shook her head, trying to take her mind off of it. It didn't matter whether Minnowtail was upset with her or not. All that mattered was that those cold-hearted excuses for cats would finally get what they deserved. And Rosethorn was going to make sure of it, if it was the last thing she ever did.

* * *

The bare branches of oak and birch trees stretched above the patrol like long, spindly claws, casting thin shadows on the cold, leaf-strewn ground. The sky was a pale, cloudy gray that seemed to yowl *leaf-bare*. The forest almost felt dead—with most of the prey sheltering from the cold in their burrows, it was eerily silent. A slight wind, combined with the muffled pawsteps of the battle patrol as they advanced toward the Twolegplace, was the only sound. Rosethorn fluffed her pelt to battle against the chill, but most of the cold she felt was inside her, not in the air around her.

Nightshade, who was walking beside her, leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "Call me mouse-brained, but I don't like the way the forest looks right now. It doesn't seem...*normal*, even for leaf-bare. I think it's a bad omen."

Rosethorn glanced at him, trying to push away the worry that gnawed harder at her. "Do you think we'll lose the battle?" she asked her friend.

Nightshade stared straight ahead, refusing to meet her eyes. "No. But there are worse things."

He's overreacting, Rosethorn tried to tell herself. *Nothing will go wrong. Some of our cats will get injured, but that's nothing we can't handle. We* will *win this fight.*

But even so, she couldn't escape the feeling that Nightshade was right in some way. She had seen how StarClan warns living cats for herself, in dreams; the starry spirits were always cryptic about it. Maybe the bleak weather *was* some kind of omen.

Rosethorn flexed her claws determinedly as she walked. Omen or no omen, victory or loss, the rogues would pay dearly for all they had done to SunClan.

Adderstar, who was at the head of the group, raised his tail. The patrol quickly quieted down. They were nearing the Twolegplace, and the invasion was meant to be a surprise one.

Rosethorn opened her jaws to taste the air for rogue scent. There were traces, but everything was old and stale.

"They haven't been in our forest for a while," she whispered to Nightshade.

"Do you think they left the Twolegplace altogether?" he asked.

"They may be cowards, but I don't think they're *that* cowardly," Rosethorn growled. "They're still around here somewhere, and we're going to find them."

Adderstar turned to face the rest of the patrol. "Spread out," he ordered. "Search for any signs of nearby rogues, and do it quietly. If we can catch any of them on our land, it'll give us the advantage."

"Come on, let's check over here." Nightshade waved his tail at Rosethorn as he dove away into the undergrowth on her right. She quickly followed him, keeping her mouth open in case of any sudden scents.

"What if we have to go into the Twolegplace to fight them?" she asked him as they paced through the area.

"I wouldn't like it," Nightshade answered. "Even being near the Twolegplace is unnerving. It doesn't seem like a place for cats."

"Maybe that's why the rogues are invading our land." Rosethorn crouched down to sniff a row of bushes. "Because they don't like

living in the Twolegplace."

"Maybe," Nightshade mewed. "But they'll have to find a different forest, then. This one's taken. Soon enough they'll realize that, and give up."

"And if they don't?"

Nightshade glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if this battle doesn't stop them from trespassing? What if it just makes them even angrier? Would we have to—"

"You're worrying too much, Rosethorn," Nightshade interrupted her. "They're *rogues,* for StarClan's sake. Even if they still come back after this—and they're mouse-brained if they do—we can deal with them again. We're a Clan. And we'll always be stronger than them, no matter what."

Rosethorn nodded quietly, feeling a little reassured. She only wished she had her old friend's optimism.

A sudden screech made her breath catch in her throat. *That sounded like Hazelfrost!* Had she found the rogues?

"Let's hurry!" she hissed to Nightshade, taking off in the direction of the sound. If her Clanmates were in trouble, she had to be there as soon as possible.

Side by side, Rosethorn and Nightshade burst into the clearing that bordered the Twolegplace, and the place where the first battle SunClan had against the rogues had been fought. They found every other cat that was in the patrol—Adderstar, Minnowtail, Shadowpool, Thumpstep, Thrushtail, Ebonypelt, Hazelfrost, Duskheart, Cherryfur, Willowstripe, Forestfire, and Harefoot—all facing a rather large group of cats that stank with the rogue stench. Hazelfrost had a small wound on her cheek that was bleeding lightly, but it didn't seem to be bothering her.

A rogue must've ambushed her, which is why she cried out, Rosethorn thought. She and Nightshade quickly joined the ranks of their Clanmates.

A large blue-gray tom stepped forward from the group of rogues; seven other cats stood behind him, their eyes narrowed furiously. "Well, isn't this interesting," he meowed, his tone smug. "Your 'surprise' attack doesn't seem like much of a surprise now."

Adderstar stepped up until he was mere mouse-lengths away from the tom. "It doesn't matter how the battle begins, only how it ends," he growled. "And if you know what's good for you, it will end with you never coming into this forest again."

"We will not abandon this forest simply because you want us to," the blue-gray tom hissed. "I had thought that our *past actions* made that quite clear."

A growl was rumbling in Rosethorn's throat before she even knew it, and she lifted a claw-spiked paw, about to step forward. Nightshade pressed against her flank and gave a tiny shake of his head, silently warning her not to lose her temper. Reluctantly she stopped growling and dug her claws into the earth.

"Your *past actions* are precisely why we are here," Adderstar responded. "You clearly don't understand Clan ways, so I'll put it simply. We do not tolerate trespassers, prey-stealers, or murderers. And you lot happen to be all three now."

Several cats in the patrol growled their agreement, Rosethorn included.

"*Clans*," sneered the rogue tom. "You're right. I don't understand Clan ways. After all, what even gives you the right to claim all this land and prey for yourself? Your scent lines are just scent lines. They don't mean anything, and they're certainly easy to cross."

"We are honor-bound by the warrior code to defend our borders from any intruders." Rosethorn couldn't see Adderstar's face, but his fluffed fur and lashing tail told her he was furious. "It's something that honorless rogues can't understand. Perhaps if we *show* you, you might get the message."

The battle patrol was all flexing muscles, gleaming claws, and threatening hisses. Ebonypelt called out, "Why even try to take us

on? You're outnumbered!"

"Oh, that *is* a problem. Maybe this will help to solve that a little."

The cat who had spoken was Minnowtail.

Rosethorn and the rest of the patrol watched with confusion as she broke from the SunClan ranks. Then, that confusion slowly turned into utter shock as the silver tabby stalked over to the rogues, and turned to stand proudly beside the blue-gray tom.

Chapter 34

"Dawnpaw, I can't sort all these bundles by myself. Stop staring at the sky and help me out."

Dawnpaw blinked, broken out of the thoughtful trance she had been in. She sighed, tearing her eyes away from the pale gray sky, and turned around, heading back into the medicine den.

Grayleaf looked sympathetic. "If you keep on worrying yourself away every time your sister goes off to fight, then we'll never get much done," she gently scolded her.

"It's not Rosethorn I'm thinking about," Dawnpaw confessed. "I mean, it kind of is, but..."

"Spit it out."

Dawnpaw sighed again. "I think this battle has something to do with the prophecy."

She peered up at Grayleaf. Her mentor looked rather surprised, as if this was the last thing she had expected to hear.

"I mean, the StarClan cat told me that dark times were coming soon," Dawnpaw went on anxiously. "What if this battle sets that into motion?" She shuffled her paws in the soft earth. "It's not just Rosethorn I'm worried about. It's the whole patrol. If the prophecy concerns this battle, I have no idea what might happen to them."

"I thought you supported the idea of the battle," Grayleaf meowed. "Now you're saying that you think it's a bad idea."

"I don't think it's a *bad* idea," Dawnpaw objected. "We had to do it, or else the rogues would never leave us in peace. But it feels like one of those things that's destined to happen, but not in a good way..." she trailed off helplessly. "It's all so confusing!"

To her surprise, Grayleaf left her sorting work and padded up to

her. She licked each of her ears comfortingly. "I know you're scared. Of many things. You're scared of what the prophecy means, of losing your sister, of failing your Clan. You might feel like you're all alone in your fears. But you're not. I'm just as scared as you are."

Dawnpaw shook her head. "No, you're not. You aren't phased by any of this, because you *know* what you're doing. I have no idea what I'm doing! I don't know why I can't put the rest of my Clan before my sister, I don't know why Violetsky chose *me* of all cats to hear the prophecy—"

Grayleaf raised a paw to silence her suddenly. Dawnpaw looked up again, and realized her mentor had tensed up, her eyes narrowed and unreadable.

"Did you say *Violetsky*?" she said slowly.

"Er...yes," Dawnpaw replied, bewildered. "It's the name of the StarClan cat that keeps visiting me in my dreams and visions." Why was Grayleaf so surprised? Was there something wrong?

Her mentor was silent for several heartbeats. She was staring hard at Dawnpaw, as if trying to solve some huge mystery that involved her. When she finally spoke, she asked, "Dawnpaw, be honest with me. Are you...*seeing* a cat from another Clan?"

"What? Of course not!" Dawnpaw was shocked. Where in the name of StarClan had *that* question come from? And how did it have anything to do with Violetsky?

Grayleaf didn't take her eyes off of her apprentice. "If you're lying to me..."

"For StarClan's sake, I'm not lying. You could ask them yourselves if you really don't believe me. What does this have to do with Violetsky?"

"Violetsky used to visit me, too," Grayleaf mewed, "back when I was still a young apprentice."

"Really?" Dawnpaw gasped. "She never told me that!"

"Did she tell you that she used to be SunClan's medicine cat?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That will make this easier to understand." Grayleaf's pale blue eyes looked misty with memories. "Violetsky was a very gifted medicine cat. A fast learner and naturally sensitive, always putting her Clan's needs before her own. She was respected by all four Clans. At least she was until...until she fell in love with a cat from another Clan."

Dawnpaw couldn't even gasp. She was stunned. "But that...that's against the warrior code! *And* the medicine cat code!"

"She knew that," Grayleaf murmured. "But she did it anyways."

"No. I won't believe it. Violetsky would never do that."

"Ask her yourself if you really don't believe me," Grayleaf retorted, echoing her apprentice's earlier words. "Anyway, it's a very long story, and it ends only in tragedy. I don't think we have time for that now. Perhaps you can ask Violetsky yourself, and she will tell you."

"Wait." Something began to click in Dawnpaw's mind. "If Violetsky fell in love with a cat from a different Clan, then she would probably visit cats who were doing the same, or in danger of it. That way she could warn them not to make the same mistake she did."

"Exactly," Grayleaf agreed. "That's why I asked you that question."

"Well, I haven't been seeing *any* cats like that," Dawnpaw promised. "Not in SunClan or outside of SunClan. Although...back when I had just been apprenticed, I used to think a lot about what it would be like to have kits of my own. And every time I would think about that, Violetsky would always appear and somehow take my mind off of it. I guess she warned me away from doing the same things she did. But even after that, she still stayed with me and kept visiting me."

"Then perhaps you just have a friend in StarClan now. You should

feel honored."

"I do feel honored," Dawnpaw purred. "Violetsky is really kind and wise. I can see why every Clan respected her." Then something else clicked in her head, something much more impossible to believe.

"Grayleaf, I'm sorry if I shouldn't ask this, but..." she fumbled for the right words to use. "Violetsky was visiting you, too. Does that mean that...you were seeing a cat from another Clan, too?"

Grayleaf's gaze sharpened and she stiffened; Dawnpaw winced, praying she wouldn't get in too much trouble for asking the wrong questions. *Still, she* is *my mentor. I have a right to know about things she's done in the past. And I know how to keep a secret, if I need to.*

Suddenly Grayleaf sighed. She had gone from looking tense and angry to wistful and weary.

"I suppose there's no concealing it from a curious furball like you," she grunted. "Yes, I was...*seeing* another cat before. But it was a very long time ago, before I had even received my medicine cat name."

"Who was it? Which Clan were they in?"

"That's not something you need to know." Grayleaf gave Dawnpaw a stern look from piercing blue eyes. "It happened seasons ago, and nothing came of it. It's over now. And don't let me hear you asking other cats about it," she warned. "No other cat knows, and no one *needs* to know."

Dawnpaw felt faintly surprised that she had ended up in this situation. Now she had the knowledge to raise many suspicions about Grayleaf, but all of StarClan would fade before she gave her mentor's secret away. *Besides, no one has a reason to believe me. I don't even know what Clan this cat was from!*

"Don't worry about it, Grayleaf," she reassured her. "I won't tell any cat."

"So I thought," the gray she-cat grunted. "Now, finish sorting those, then you can take a break." She flicked her tail towards the half-sorted line of herbs they would need for battle injuries. Then she

stalked past Dawnpaw and headed out of the den.

Dawnpaw stared after her. *I thought she was supposed to help me do it.* She must have made Grayleaf mad by asking such private questions. Guilt clawed at her. *I didn't mean to upset her. I was just curious. Besides,* she told herself, *the only reason I was asking was because* she *told me that Violetsky used to visit her, too.*

Still, it had been disrespectful of her to question her mentor like that. She was still only an apprentice, after all. She had to be obedient and respectful of Grayleaf. And right now, she could do that by finishing sorting the herbs out and forgetting about their earlier discussion.

Briskly Dawnpaw headed over to the herbs and began her work. As she mindlessly dug through marigold, horsetail, comfrey and all kinds of other plants, she felt herself begin to relax. It seemed Grayleaf had been right; working hard really did help take her mind off of her troubles.

We don't have any goldenrod at all, she realized, checking over the assortment of plants. The only clump of the tall yellow flowers that grew on SunClan territory had been torn up by Rosethorn in an effort to cover up Minnowtail's scent near the MoonClan border. The plants had not grown back in time for leaf-bare; now she and Grayleaf would have to wait until the next leaf-fall—which was moons away—before they could restock their goldenrod supply.

Dawnpaw couldn't help feeling irritated with her sister about that. There were plenty of other strong-scented plants around that area. Why had she chosen the one plant that was the most important? What if one of the injured cats that came back from the battle couldn't be healed because they were out of goldenrod? Rosethorn would be partly responsible for that!

Then her anger cooled down a little. Rosethorn hadn't *meant* to pick the goldenrod flowers. She was a warrior; she had no idea that those flowers had been an important medicine. Dawnpaw couldn't blame her for something she hadn't meant to do.

Rosethorn would certainly blame herself, though, she realized. Her

sister would be ridden with guilt if it turned out that the medicine cats needed goldenrod to treat the injured warriors. And there would be no convincing her that it wasn't her fault.

Perhaps we could just ask one of the other medicine cats if they had any goldenrod to spare. The half-moon meeting isn't too far from now.

Dawnpaw and Grayleaf would just have to pray that they didn't need goldenrod right away. The rest of their herb stock would have to do for now.

Anxiously Dawnpaw wondered if the patrol was already battling the rogues. She wondered if Beestripe had chosen enough cats, or if they were outnumbered. She wondered how long she would have to wait like this before the patrol came back. *I don't know how much longer I can take this. It's torture. Cats could be dying, and here I am completely clueless.*

"Then do something about it."

Dawnpaw gasped. She turned around, and there Violetsky was—gazing at her with that familiar intensity that always made her worth listening to.

"Y-You're here!" Dawnpaw stammered. She found it hard to focus on why Violetsky had really come, when thoughts of what Grayleaf had told her about the former SunClan medicine cat. *She fell in love with a cat from another Clan.*

"Yes, I'm here," Violetsky purred. "As you can see, I do not only come to you when your thoughts drift to things they shouldn't. I come to you when you are troubled, and I give you guidance and reassurance."

"So you heard Grayleaf and I talking." Dawnpaw shifted her paws self-consciously. "I suppose I don't have to tell you what I'm wondering. You already know."

Violetsky shook her head fondly. "Perhaps I will tell you later. But there is not time for that now."

"What? Did something happen at the battle?" Dawnpaw's heart

pounded in her ears.

"Not yet." Violetsky put a lot of emphasis on the word *yet*. "I'm not concerned about what's happening over there right now. I'm talking about *you*."

"Me?" Dawnpaw echoed. "What about me?" *I'm not important right now! The battle is important!*

"I can tell you are overwhelmed with fear and anxiety," Violetsky mewed. "You wonder if your Clanmates are dying while you sit idle, not knowing a thing. But tell me: if that is how you feel, why not do something about it? Why not take action, and go to the battlefield yourself?"

Go to the battlefield? "I couldn't do that!" Dawnpaw protested. "Grayleaf would never let me. Besides, I can barely fight. I could get myself killed, and that's one less medicine cat here to heal the injured warriors."

Violetsky leaned closer to her. "The job of a medicine cat does not just mean healing your Clanmates," she responded. "It also means that you are willing to risk your own life to save your Clanmates. If you stay here, safe and waiting for the patrol's return, then some of your Clanmates might not even make it back."

Dawnpaw thought of Rosethorn. What would happen if she was killed? Quickstorm and Patchflower would be just as devastated as she would be. What about Adderstar? SunClan would be left in ruins if he was killed, even after Beestripe became the new leader. And that was just two cats. If even just one SunClan cat died today, no matter *who* it was, it would send shockwaves through the entire Clan. She could not let that happen.

"You're right, Violetsky," she meowed. "I have to help somehow. I need to find Grayleaf."

Violetsky took a few steps closer until she was nose-to-nose with Dawnpaw, blue eyes glowing with fondness. "One more thing before you go. Every cat in StarClan knows about the prophecy, but no one knows what it truly means. Only Sunstar knew. But we all can sense

that something big is coming, something dark. We don't know what it is, but we *do* know it's coming soon."

The starry spirit touched her nose to Dawnpaw's. "I want you to know that I'm very proud of you. I only came to you because you were in danger of straying from the code of medicine cats. But the longer I've stayed with you, the more I've realized that you are braver and stronger than any other cat I've watched, be it warrior or medicine cat. And no matter what comes next, I know that you can find the strength to overcome it."

Dawnpaw shook her head slowly, unable to believe it. "How do you know that?" she asked. "I may be a medicine cat, but there's nothing special about me. That's all I am; just an ordinary medicine cat."

"You may think that," Violetsky murmured, "but Sunstar didn't. He delivered the prophecy to *you*, Dawnpaw. He chose you to hear his last words before his spirit faded. Whether that means that you are part of the prophecy, or simply a messenger, I don't know. But you are special indeed."

Dawnpaw gazed at her StarClan friend. "I suppose there's only one way to find out."

Violetsky nodded. "Then go. Do what you have to do to keep your Clan safe."

And with that, the spirit's shape began to dissolve like mist when wind comes, until no trace of her remained.

Dawnpaw left the medicine den with a renewed sense of confidence. Even if she didn't have a role in the prophecy after all, she still had a job to do. And she would stop at nothing to make sure that her Clan was safe.

Almost immediately she spotted Grayleaf. She was sitting beneath the Cliffrock with Beestripe, who was acting as leader in Adderstar's place while he was gone. The two had their heads bent close together, as if they didn't want any cat to hear what they were saying.

Should I really ask her now? Dawnpaw wondered uncertainly. *They don't look like they should be interrupted.*

Then she shook herself briskly. Who cared about interrupting cats when her Clanmates could be dying with no medicine cat to help them? Without a second thought she sprinted across the camp, sliding to a halt in front of Beestripe and Grayleaf, who abruptly stopped talking as she came up.

Grayleaf stared at her apprentice. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "I thought I told you to finish organizing those herbs!"

"I know," Dawnpaw panted, "but I need to talk to you. It's urgent."

The irritation in Grayleaf's eyes sharpened into curiosity. She glanced briefly at Beestripe. "We'll talk later," she mewed, flicking her tail in a dismissive fashion.

Beestripe dipped his head in acknowledgement. With a final bemused glance at Dawnpaw, he got to his paws and bounded away to join Patchflower, Quickstorm, and Robinfeather at the fresh-kill pile.

"So what is it?" Grayleaf prompted.

"I have to go to the battle!" Dawnpaw blurted. "What if our Clanmates are so badly injured that they can't make it back to camp? What if while we're sitting here doing nothing, our warriors are dying with no one to help them? We should be with them instead, pulling any cats that are hurt away from the fight and—"

"Absolutely not!" Grayleaf gasped. "I know how worried you are, but we can't risk our lives by throwing ourselves into the thick of the battle. It's too dangerous."

"That doesn't *matter*!" Dawnpaw hissed, willing her mentor to agree with her. "Why worry about what might happen to us when we should be more worried about the warriors who are *already* risking their lives?"

"Because if we're killed, then there will be no one *at all* to heal them," Grayleaf retorted. "What do you think the rest of the Clan

would do after that? Drag half-dead cats across Clan borders and beg for help? MoonClan is too far away, and do you honestly think FireClan would want to help us?"

"We can be careful!" Dawnpaw pleaded. "We'll stay off to the side, out of sight. We'll only come out when a SunClan cat really needs our help."

"Dawnpaw, listen to me." Grayleaf was staring so intensely into her eyes, she found it impossible to look away. It reminded her of Violetsky. "This fight against the rogues is not just a fight. This is a *war*. A war against savage cats that have no code of honor to bind them. Being 'careful' won't save us from that."

This is what Violetsky wants me to do! Dawnpaw thought desperately. *She would never lead me to my death!*

"Grayleaf, please—"

"The answer is no, Dawnpaw." Grayleaf broke eye contact with her, staring into the distance with an unreadable expression. "I'm sorry, but this is a risk that SunClan cannot afford to take."

Dawnpaw sighed, helplessly dipping her head. "Okay," she whispered. "I'll go finish organizing the herbs, then."

"That would be best." Grayleaf did not even glance in her direction.

Dawnpaw took off back towards the medicine den. She pushed her way through the frail vines that grew over the entrance, spying the variety of plants that were spread out on the ground towards the back.

Instead of continuing with her sorting work, however, she padded over to the small, narrow holes in the earth that she and Grayleaf used to store their herbs in. In one of them was a supply of the largest oak leaves they could find, collected only a couple moons ago in leaf-fall. Dawnpaw drew one of them out with a forepaw and dragged it over to the half-sorted herbs. She put as many herbs on the leaf as she could in small amounts, knowing she would have no help with carrying the herb wrap.

When she was done, she wrapped the leaf in a thick layer of cobwebs to make sure nothing fell out, and as a way to bring cobwebs along too. Then she picked the wrap up firmly in her jaws and took a deep breath—through her nostrils—to calm herself.

Grayleaf may not be willing to take the risk.

But I am.

Chapter 35

"What in StarClan's name are you doing?" Adderstar stared at Minnowtail with poorly disguised horror. Rosethorn dug her claws into the earth, feeling a chilling sense of realization. She had been right; Minnowtail was a traitor after all. *But she wasn't with MoonClan. She was with the rogues!*

Now Minnowtail met Adderstar's eyes defiantly. "I think you know what I'm doing," she growled.

"Minnowtail!" A stunned Shadowpool leaped from the SunClan ranks to stand in the center of the clearing. "You can't be serious! Do you realize what you're doing?"

Minnowtail's eyes were cold with resolve. "I'm sorry for leaving you, Shadowpool, but I can't stay in SunClan anymore."

"You're a traitor!" Hazelfrost snarled. She was stiff with fury; Rosethorn could tell how hard it was for her not to spring at Minnowtail.

"You betrayed us!" Forestfire hissed.

"You're no better than a rogue yourself!" Harefoot yowled.

Shadowpool glanced between the two battle lines, eyes wide with distress. At last he met Rosethorn's eyes. She shook her head sadly. *I don't think he ever truly thought his sister was a traitor,* she thought. *But now he's watched her switch sides right in front of him. I could never imagine how that feels.* Her heart ached with sympathy, and with fury that Minnowtail had done this.

Hazelfrost glared furiously at Shadowpool. "Well?" she demanded. "Are you just going to stand there? Or are you going to join your traitor sister?"

"Back off, Hazelfrost!" Rosethorn growled. "He's done nothing

wrong."

Hazelfrost looked as if she was about to respond scathingly, but then thought better of it.

Shadowpool glanced at Rosethorn gratefully, then looked back at Minnowtail. "Why are you doing this?" he rasped.

"You were my apprentice," Thumpstep added, staring at Minnowtail with icy disapproval. "I did not train a traitor."

"You're right, Thumpstep." Minnowtail's tone was scathing; Rosethorn had never seen her this angry before. "You *didn't* train a traitor. You trained a cat who you expected would blindly follow a stupid, useless warrior code just because some other cats did too."

"That code has saved countless cats from dying pointless deaths!" Thumpstep retorted. "You should be glad I taught it to you. The Clans would be dead if not for the warrior code."

"Oh, *please*," Minnowtail sniffed with obvious disdain. "You mouse-brains could be starving, and you wouldn't eat a fat pigeon if it wasn't killed neatly and blessed by StarClan. But luckily enough, the rest of the Clan cats are dumb enough to follow *that* rule."

Thumpstep's eyes clouded over, while Minnowtail's narrowed with satisfaction. "Yeah," she hissed. "Yeah, I remember what you said that day. I never forgot."

Rosethorn realized Minnowtail must have stirred some old memory that was shared between the two of them. *Is Thumpstep part of the reason she left SunClan?*

She noticed that the rogue cats were watching the Clan cats with undisguised amusement. *They're enjoying watching this. I wouldn't be surprised if Minnowtail had planned this with them so SunClan would be distracted during the battle.*

Her claws flexed instinctively. *Well, they won't distract* me*,* she told herself. *I still know exactly why I'm here.*

Thumpstep's eyes hardened moments later. "If you can't understand

the value of the warrior code, then maybe you *should* be a rogue."

His tone faltered ever-so-slightly as he spoke. Rosethorn couldn't even begin to imagine what he must be going through, watching his own former apprentice betray her Clan. He was clearly trying not to show it.

"It's not just the *warrior code*," Minnowtail hissed. "It's the Clans as a whole! If something, *anything* doesn't abide by your stupid rules, then it has no meaning to you at all! And every time I accidentally broke the warrior code, even if I caught a good piece of prey or drove some intruder off our territory, everyone was *still* upset with me."

Her eyes raked scathingly across the SunClan battle line. "Do you have any idea what that feels like?" she demanded. "To not be appreciated for anything you do because of some foolish code?"

"Then maybe you should have stuck to the code instead of questioning it like it was a cat crossing our border," Adderstar growled.

"Or maybe you should have admitted that not everything has to abide by *your* rules," Minnowtail shot back. "There are things outside of the warrior code that are just as good as Clans. You're not better than everyone else like you think you are."

She glanced over her shoulder at the rogues that stood behind her. Rosethorn could have sworn she had seen some emotion flicker in her eyes...*pride? Fondness?*

"These cats," she went on, "understand the way I feel. They actually appreciate the things I do. They're good cats." She returned her gaze to the Clan cats. "They have rules, but unlike you, they don't pore over them and shun cats outside of them. They don't hide behind them like cowards."

"They stole our prey!" Forestfire meowed disbelievingly.

"They murdered Pineclaw!" snarled Rosethorn. "How could you possibly think they're *good*?"

"Thrushtail and Pineclaw attacked them first," Minnowtail meowed. "They were only defending themselves. But of course none of you will believe that, or anything else I say. So if we're done debating the reasons for my departure, how about we do what we came here to do?"

The blue-gray tom bounded forward to stand beside her; the rest of the rogues moved up with him. Their eyes glinted with anticipation for the upcoming fight.

Rosethorn could not tear her eyes away from Minnowtail. She was trembling with fury that she could barely keep in check. *She thinks Pineclaw's death was justified! She thinks the rogues were in the right all along!*

The idea of her mentor's death being self defense on the rogues' part was inconceivable. The only *conceivable* thing she could think of in that moment was sinking her claws into Minnowtail's flesh and ripping her pelt off. Then finding Pineclaw's killer—no, Pineclaw's *murderer*—and doing the same to him, or worse.

"If you're so eager to fight the cats you grew up around, then so be it," Adderstar snarled. "SunClan, *attack*!"

And the battlefield exploded.

A thin, mottled brown she-cat charged straight towards Rosethorn as if she had been waiting to attack her. Rosethorn, with just enough time to spare, sidestepped the attack. The rogue's claws barely missed her shoulder; she felt a gust of wind as she passed by.

She whipped around to see the rogue already racing towards her again. This time Rosethorn couldn't dodge it and was tackled to the ground, the breath driven out of her. *This cat is fast! I need to slow her down...*

The rogue sank her claws into either of her shoulders, pinning her, and bared her teeth, aiming for her right ear. Rosethorn shrank back with a hiss, and the bite missed. Then she twisted her head to the left and bit down as hard as she could on the rogue's forepaw. All her anger at Minnowtail was poured into the attack like an

adder's poison into a wound. The brown she-cat screeched in agony and scrambled off of her.

That should stop her from running so quickly, Rosethorn thought with satisfaction as she leaped to her paws.

The rogue she-cat was panting hard, staring at her with narrowed eyes brimming with hatred. Rosethorn charged at her with a yowl. She reared onto her hind paws, ready to meet her. Rosethorn ducked and picked up her pace, and smashed into the rogue's hind legs, sweeping her off her feet.

When she turned around, she found the rogue sprawled out on the ground, coughing as she tried to regain her breath. Rosethorn sprang at her and landed square on her back, pushing her face into the dirt and sinking her claws into her pelt.

"This'll teach you to mess with SunClan," she hissed. Her teeth snapped over the rogue's ear, earning another pained screech from her.

I think she's had enough, she decided. She leaped off of the brown rogue and watched as she stumbled to her paws—which were bruised and bleeding—and limped away as quick as she could.

"Rosethorn, heads up!" She snapped her head towards the sound of Nightshade's voice, and realized a light gray tabby tom was racing towards her.

With a yowl of surprise she leaped to one side, dodging his attack. The next thing she knew, Nightshade had him pinned and was clawing at his flanks furiously. *He's even faster than that brown she-cat!* she thought with a flash of admiration.

Rosethorn bounded up to him. "Need some help?" she growled, sinking her teeth into the gray rogue's ear. She held her grip, while Nightshade continued ripping at his flanks, until he begged for mercy and they let him go. He ran screeching into the throng of fighting cats and disappeared.

Rosethorn glanced at Nightshade triumphantly and realized he did

not look as happy as she felt. Instead he was gazing at her with muted grief and shock. His expression told her all she needed to know: he was thinking about Minnowtail.

"I should have believed you," he whispered numbly. "We could have stopped this before it happened."

Rosethorn stared at him in confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Minnowtail wasn't the one who started the battle."

"Don't you see?" Nightshade stared back at her miserably. "She had this all planned out from the start. The night of the Gathering, when she said she was feeling ill and couldn't come? She must have snuck away and warned the rogues that SunClan was going to launch a surprise attack. But I don't understand how she could have *known*..."

"I know how," Rosethorn realized suddenly. "It was Dawnpaw and I who gave Adderstar the idea of attacking the rogues. When we left his den, Minnowtail was just outside. She said she was going to tell Adderstar that she didn't want to come to the Gathering, but she must have been eavesdropping too." *I should have noticed before!* she told herself angrily, blood boiling in her veins. *I was the one who was suspicious of her from the start, and I didn't even notice her betrayal when it was standing right in front of me!*

"If I hadn't been so stubborn," Nightshade rasped, "if I had just stopped and listened to you, this never would have happened. We would have had the advantage instead of risking losing the battle."

"This isn't your fault, Nightshade," Rosethorn responded. "You can't blame yourself for something that Minnowtail did."

"That's not all I'm blaming myself for!" Nightshade retorted. "If I had listened to you instead of blaming you for everything, we would still be friends. But instead I pushed you away because of my own stubborn belief that Minnowtail was actually a loyal cat. You have no idea how sorry I am."

"Nightshade, we *are* still friends," Rosethorn meowed gently. "I forgave you for all those things before this battle even started. After all, you were right that I didn't have any real proof against her. I

was stubborn, too. I was so convinced that Minnowtail was a traitor, I was willing to throw away my best friend if it meant proving I was right. And even if I *was* right in the end, I still risked losing you. I was *overjoyed* when you started talking to me again. I thought we really would never speak to each other again, but that didn't happen, thank StarClan. We're still friends, and I hope that nothing will ever change that."

The battle between warrior and rogue still raged around them, but for a moment that felt like an eternity Rosethorn barely cared. She had to make Nightshade understand that she still wanted to be friends with him, no matter what happened in the past.

Now he was gazing at her with ice-blue eyes brimming with too many emotions to count. Surprise, relief, joy, and of course...love. That was, Rosethorn admitted, the *only* thing that might tear her and Nightshade apart. He was still in love with her after all this time, and she was still devastated over Pineclaw's murder. She didn't think she would ever be able to love another cat after what had happened to her former mentor.

She waited anxiously for what her friend was going to say. But all he said was, "We should get back to the battle. They need our help."

Then, without another word, he dove away into the mass of growling, screeching cats.

With a frustrated sigh, Rosethorn followed suit. She glanced around quickly, assessing the battle. It looked as if SunClan was winning; many of the rogues had already fled. But they were putting up a good fight; the entire battle patrol was battered from head to toe.

A pained yowl from Hazelfrost caught her attention. The dark brown she-cat was struggling fiercely beneath a light brown tabby that looked strangely familiar...*wait a minute, that's Fauna!* The rogue she-cat who had been hunting with her friend Poppy was here at the battle, too.

Rosethorn sprinted to Hazelfrost's rescue with a fierce battle cry, using her full body weight to knock Fauna off of her. The two cats rolled over one another in a tangled mass of fur and claws.

Eventually they halted, and Fauna was on top. Instantly she began tearing at Rosethorn's flanks.

Hissing with fury and pain, Rosethorn started pummeling Fauna's belly with her hind paws. Her claws made their mark, and she felt warm blood spatter from the soft flesh beneath her belly fur. Fauna screeched in pain. Rosethorn took advantage of her moment of weakness and heaved upwards with every bit of strength she could muster.

She managed to get Fauna off of her and quickly rolled out of range. Before she could even get to her paws, she heard Hazelfrost begin attacking her again. And by the time she had stood up, Fauna was limping away in the direction of the Twolegplace, yelping and hissing as she went.

"This is *our* forest!" Hazelfrost yowled after her. "Don't let Zodiac forget that!"

The fierce senior warrior turned to face Rosethorn. "Thanks for your help," she panted, giving her a respectful nod. "You've always fought well, even as an apprentice."

Rosethorn dipped her head gratefully, remembering that Hazelfrost had indeed been part of that first battle against the rogues. She felt warmed with pride as the dark she-cat turned and sprinted away to look for her next target. Hazelfrost could be a bit stubborn and fierce at times, but she was still a fine and well-respected warrior.

Then something else caught her attention, at the edge of her vision. She turned and saw none other than Poppy, who had Adderstar completely pinned to the ground.

Frozen with horror, all she could do was watch as Poppy viciously sank her teeth into the SunClan leader's throat.

Chapter 36

Time slowed to a near halt. Rosethorn's vision narrowed until all she could see was Poppy as her fangs tightened their deadly grip on Adderstar's neck. She could only watch, her paws feeling rooted to the ground.

Until she started to run.

She ran as fast as her paws would carry her, straight towards Poppy. Anger and protectiveness gave her an adrenaline that coursed through her veins and made her feel like she could take on any enemy she faced. Including this heartless rogue who *dared* think she could get away with killing her leader.

These rogues will not *get away with any more murder!*

Rosethorn leaped with a ferocious yowl, crashing into Poppy and tearing her away from Adderstar. The two she-cats went down with a loud *thump*, and Rosethorn had Poppy pinned beneath her.

Overcome with her own memories and emotions, the next thing Rosethorn knew was her own jaws clamping over Poppy's throat. She cringed as the salty, metallic taste of blood ran over her tongue —not at all sweet like the blood of prey that she was used to. Poppy's paws flailed desperately for a few heartbeats, her shriek gurgling in her throat. Then she jerked one last time, and fell completely still.

Suddenly realizing what she was doing, Rosethorn pulled back, releasing her grip on the rogue. Poppy's once fiery blue eyes were now clouded and sightless, staring up at nothing. Her mouth hung open, and a small stream of blood trickled from the corner.

Rosethorn stared, stunned, at the dead rogue. *I had to protect Adderstar...but I hadn't meant to kill her!*

Backing away from Poppy's limp body, she glanced around. The

battle had separated. Both sides were panting and dripping with blood, and every cat's gaze was trained on her. Except for Adderstar, who had rolled onto his belly and was coughing and gasping as he tried to regain his breath.

Rosethorn was about to race to his side, to check if he was alright, but she froze. The blue tom who had been leading the rogues emerged from the crowd. His golden eyes were dark with horror as he caught sight of his fallen campmate. Then he looked up at Rosethorn.

"What have you done?" he rasped, his tone wretched with hatred and grief.

Rosethorn was surprised to find her voice strong and certain. "Only what I had to. She was going to kill my leader."

The rogue tom shook his head slowly. "You didn't save his life. You only prolonged it." He glanced at Poppy's corpse, and back at her. "This isn't over," he snarled. "Mark my words, *SunClan*. We will be back. And you will pay for what you've done."

"We could say the same of you." Hazelfrost came up to stand at Rosethorn's side. "Now get off of our territory, before this gets even bloodier."

The blue tom let out a soft hiss, but did not step forward or attack. Instead, he lashed his tail once, and in one big group the rogues began to retreat.

All except for one cat: Minnowtail.

The silver she-cat looked calm now, and not in the mood for battle. Her eyes were fixed firmly on Rosethorn.

"Poppy was my campmate, you know."

"No, she wasn't," Rosethorn growled. "She was just one of the fox-hearts who convinced you to betray your *real* campmates."

Several SunClan warriors behind her hissed their agreement.

Minnowtail slowly shook her head. "This isn't the last time you'll see me." Strangely, her tone suggested that she was talking to Rosethorn only. The rest of SunClan seemed almost invisible to her.

"Oh, I hope it isn't," Rosethorn growled. "I still want to teach you a thing or two about what happens when you turn your back on SunClan. Especially because some of these cats *raised* you, taught you everything you know."

"Raised me?" Minnowtail scoffed. "They made me doubt whether I was even worthy of being in a Clan. And now I know the truth: not that I'm unworthy, but that I'm *too good* to be bound by useless Clan rules and traditions. I'd rather be free to live my life as I see fit, with cats who actually care about me."

"So what about Shadowpool? Or Shinefur and Duskheart?" Rosethorn shook her head with disbelief. "They didn't care about you? You're willing to leave your kin behind, just like that?"

"Now that I'm gone, Shinefur and Duskheart can dedicate all their time to Shadowpool." She was stunned by the bitterness in Minnowtail's tone. "But it's not like they'll be doing anything different, there."

Did Shinefur and Duskheart neglect her over her brother? Rosethorn wondered. *I had no idea she felt this way. But then again, I never talked to her that much when she was still a warrior.*

"I can't believe this." She looked up at the sound of Minnowtail's voice again. Now the silver she-cat was gazing sorrowfully at Poppy's body. "You blame the rogues for murder, but when *you* kill one of *our* own, it's perfectly justified."

Before Rosethorn could even try to defend her actions, Minnowtail swept on.

"Well, it's not justified. None of this is. And I know that this was your doing, *Rosethorn*." She narrowed her eyes furiously. "This battle was your fault. Poppy's death was your fault. This is *all* your fault!"

Minnowtail had gone from calm, to bitter, to grief-stricken, to utterly furious. And nearly all of her emotions seemed to be directed at Rosethorn.

"I promise you, you're going to pay for this. *All of this*. I'm going to find you someday, and when I'm finished with you there won't be anything left for your pathetic Clanmates to bury!"

Her words sent a shiver down Rosethorn's spine. And yet, at the same time, they inspired a daring fury deep within her. *Oh, I'd love to see her try. If she thinks I'm going down without a fight, she can think again!*

"You'll have to get through me first." Suddenly Nightshade appeared on her other side, his claws glinting menacingly in the sun.

"And me," Hazelfrost growled.

"If you mess with her, you mess with all of us." Cherryfur stepped forward as well, while Adderstar was still recovering on the ground. Beside her was Ebonypelt, and Thumpstep, and Shadowpool...until every single cat on the patrol was lined up beside Rosethorn.

She was touched, and beyond grateful, for her Clanmates' support. *I'll never understand how Minnowtail could turn her back on so many strong, kind, loyal cats.*

Minnowtail was obviously daunted by all the cats that stood threateningly before her. She focused on Rosethorn again, and growled softly. Her eyes lit up with a malicious excitement.

"All in good time," she murmured. "We'll have our revenge. And I'll kill Rosethorn if it's the last thing I do."

And with that, she spun around and disappeared into the undergrowth, following her new campmates back to her new home.

Rosethorn closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself, taking in everything that had just happened. Minnowtail had betrayed SunClan. Poppy was killed, which ended the battle without a true victor. And Minnowtail had vowed to get her revenge in the darkest way possible.

If it's a fight she wants with me, then I'll be happy to give her one. I'll meet her with tooth and claw, with my whole Clan by my side.

"Dawnpaw! What in StarClan's name are you doing here?"

She almost thought she had imagined Cherryfur's surprised words. But when she looked around, all her Clanmates were staring at something behind her. Turning around, she realized that Dawnpaw was indeed emerging from the bushes.

"I just figured...I had to come and help you," she panted, clearly out of breath. "Even if Grayleaf wanted me to stay in camp. I didn't think the battle would be over so soon, though." Her amber eyes narrowed when she spotted Poppy's body. "Is that...a rogue?"

"She tried to murder Adderstar," Rosethorn meowed grimly. "I did what I had to do."

Dawnpaw looked around, probably searching for Adderstar. Suddenly she gasped, and bolted away.

Rosethorn followed her gaze, and gasped as well. She had been so caught up with Minnowtail, that she hadn't realized how serious her leader's injuries really were. Adderstar was lying on his side, blood oozing from the jagged gash on his neck and pooling around him. Only the shallow rise and fall of his flank showed that he was still alive.

Oh, StarClan...was I too late? This can't have been for nothing!

She bounded up to Dawnpaw and crouched beside her leader's body. "How can I help?"

"I didn't bring enough cobwebs for a wound this big," Dawnpaw meowed quickly. "Go find some. Take someone with you and bring back as much as you can."

"I'll go with you," Nightshade offered immediately.

Rosethorn nodded gratefully. "Then let's hurry."

As they raced away, she heard Dawnpaw giving out more

instructions. "Cherryfur, do you know what marigold looks or smells like? I know it's leaf-bare, but try your best to find some. Thrushtail, Forestfire, come here and..." Her voice faded the farther away Rosethorn and Nightshade got.

Rosethorn felt a warm sense of pride in her sister. She was so level-headed and certain, unafraid to disobey her own mentor if it meant saving her Clanmates' lives. *I can't believe I was ever upset with her for choosing to be a medicine cat,* she thought. *She does her job perfectly. I think she was born for this.*

"This oak stump is hollow. There's bound to be cobwebs inside." Nightshade's meow cut into her thoughts. They slid to a halt in front of the stump—it looked charred and jagged, perhaps struck by lightning—and immediately began searching for cobwebs.

Good, there's plenty, Rosethorn thought with relief with she saw thick white masses littering the inside of the oak stump. She reached into the gap with one paw and wrapped as much cobweb around it as she could manage. When she drew her paw back out, she glanced at Nightshade and found that he also had a forepaw completely covered in webs.

"I think this'll be more than enough," she mewed. "Let's get back to Adderstar."

"How many lives do you think he has left?" Nightshade panted as they ran. "This can't be his last. Grayleaf wouldn't have let him lead the battle patrol if it was."

"Maybe Dawnpaw knows," Rosethorn replied. "She's a medicine cat. Don't they know those kinds of things instinctively?"

"Whatever the case, I hope it isn't too late to save him," Nightshade said anxiously.

"It won't be too late," Rosethorn meowed firmly, reassuring herself as well as her friend. "Dawnpaw knows what she's doing, and we're all helping her."

But as they approached the bloodstained clearing, they pricked

their ears at the sound of Dawnpaw's cries.

"Adderstar, no! You have to stay with us, please!"

Rosethorn's heart lurched with fear. She exchanged a horrified glance with Nightshade; then the two burst through the bushes back into the clearing.

Dawnpaw was bent over the SunClan leader, shaking him desperately. His eyes were as glazed as Poppy's, staring wide-eyed at the forest canopy. The rest of the battle patrol was gathered behind them. Some cats stared with shock; others with sorrow; some weren't looking at all, their heads bowed in grief.

Rosethorn ran on her three free paws over to Dawnpaw and Adderstar. "No, it can't be," she whispered hoarsely. She tore the cobwebs off her paw and tried to press them into the wound on Adderstar's neck, which was still bleeding slowly.

The leader did not move a muscle. His flank was still, paws limp, eyes gazing into space.

Dawnpaw pressed against her; Rosethorn could feel the grief coming from her in waves.

"It's too late," she rasped. "He's dead."

"But he's not *gone*," Rosethorn meowed hopefully. "How many lives does he have?"

Dawnpaw shook her head helplessly. "I-I don't know. Grayleaf never told me."

"There's no way this is his last. StarClan *must* send him back to us!"

"Let's pray that they will."

And in that moment, all cats' heads were bowed, in grief and in prayer that Adderstar was not gone forever. It was almost as if time was frozen; the forest itself was utterly silent, like it too was grieving. Above, through the forest's thinning canopy, the sky spread out ever pale and bleak, like stone against the green leaves.

And then one cat's voice sliced into the silence. "Oh, StarClan...what happened here?"

Dawnpaw spun around, her eyes wide with surprise and horror. "Grayleaf!"

Rosethorn turned around too. The elderly medicine cat was coming out of the undergrowth, blue eyes daunted at the scene she had come across. She stiffened when she caught sight of the two bodies that were splayed out in the bloody clearing, Adderstar's in particular.

"Grayleaf, I'm so sorry!" Dawnpaw whispered. "I tried to save him, but he—"

Grayleaf swung her head to glare at her apprentice. "*You*," she growled icily, "can go back to the camp and tell the rest of the Clan what happened. Then go to the medicine den and get the herbs ready. And *stay there* until I get back."

Dawnpaw looked astonished by her mentor's anger. She shook her head. "I didn't mean—"

"*Go*," Grayleaf hissed.

Dawnpaw ducked her head quickly. Rosethorn could sense her guilt and shame, and felt sorry for her. *She tried her best to save Adderstar, and all Grayleaf wants to do is scold her. That hardly seems reasonable!*

But her sister did not protest again. Instead she padded away in the direction of the camp with her drooping tail tucked between her legs.

"Now, then," Grayleaf meowed, her tone still brisk. "Thrushtail, Thumpstep. You don't seem too badly injured. Carry Adderstar's body back to camp. Luckily this isn't his final life, but he still needs to be in my den if he's going to get proper treatment."

Rosethorn couldn't help thinking that she had emphasized the word *proper*. Anger boiled in her belly. But she held her tongue, knowing better than to contradict a medicine cat. She watched as Thumpstep and Thrushtail gently nudged their shoulders beneath Adderstar

and lifted him as one.

As the patrol set out to return home, she wondered bleakly if this battle had been a terrible idea after all.

Chapter 37

Adderstar lost a life, and it's my fault.

This thought stalked Dawnpaw like a fox stalking a rabbit as she trudged back to camp alone. What if that had been Adderstar's last life? SunClan's leader would have died right in front of her, a medicine cat who was supposed to make sure that *didn't* happen. The Clan never would've been able to forgive her, and Grayleaf would have hated her.

Well, she still hates me anyways.

The memory of Grayleaf's fury towards Dawnpaw was still fresh in her mind. Her blue eyes had burned straight through her, and her tone had been sharper than a fox's fangs. She hadn't wanted to listen to a word Dawnpaw had to say.

I messed everything up. I disobeyed Grayleaf, and I couldn't even save one cat, let alone treat as many as I should have. Why did I ever sneak out of camp?

Even if she hadn't been there, the turnout would have been the same. Nothing she'd done had changed anything.

If Grayleaf had been there, there's no way she would have let Adderstar die.

Then Dawnpaw thought of something: if her mentor had agreed with her plan to travel to the battlefield and treat cats there, then Adderstar would have gotten treatment immediately. Plus, it wouldn't have just been Dawnpaw. Grayleaf would have been there too, and because there were two cats they would have had enough herbs, instead of having warriors get what they needed. *And none of this would have happened!*

But Dawnpaw couldn't bring herself to be mad at Grayleaf. The only cat she could be mad at was herself. After all, she had been one of

the cats who supported the battle that got Adderstar killed. She had chosen to disobey her own mentor, thinking she would be able to help her Clanmates. But instead she came completely unprepared, and it had cost her leader one of his lives. If she had done *anything*, it was making things worse than before.

Dawnpaw sighed defeatedly. *I suppose there's no point in sulking right now,* she decided. *I'd better do what Grayleaf asked before she has another reason to yell at me.*

When she entered the camp through the fern tunnel, she found the clearing packed full of anxious cats. They turned to look at her as soon as she came in, and looked surprised.

Beestripe bounded up to her, looking stern. "Grayleaf says you weren't supposed to leave camp. She had to go out looking for you. What in StarClan's name were you thinking?"

Dawnpaw didn't feel like explaining her reasons for sneaking away. Not when no cat wanted to understand. Instead she meowed, "Adderstar lost a life. Grayleaf and the rest of the patrol are on their way back with him. They should be here soon."

Beestripe blinked, looking shocked. "Is he alright now? What about the rest of the patrol?"

"Every other cat isn't too badly hurt. But Grayleaf needs to treat Adderstar in her den. So excuse me, but I should really go get everything ready for her."

Relieved that she had found some way to end the conversation, Dawnpaw turned away abruptly and headed for the medicine den. She ignored the questioning looks that her Clanmates gave her as she passed.

Somehow she wasn't startled or surprised to find Violetsky waiting for her inside. The StarClan spirit was sitting beside the herb store with an unreadable gaze.

Dawnpaw didn't have the energy to feel angry at her starry friend. She couldn't even meet her eyes. Instead, she simply ignored her

and padded over to the remainder of the herbs that Grayleaf had laid out.

Adderstar's wound is pretty big. We'll need some fresh cobwebs, and more marigold since we have no goldenrod. Perhaps some poppy seeds, too, in case he's still in pain when he wakes up...

"I'm not going anywhere, Dawnpaw. If you just ignore me, then I'll still be here when Grayleaf gets back."

"She can't even see you," Dawnpaw replied, barely paying any attention to Violetsky's words.

"She can see me if I want her to," Violetsky retorted.

Dawnpaw spun around and glared at her. "Okay, so I'm paying attention now," she hissed. "What do you want me to say? Should I thank you for sending me on a fool's errand that only made everything worse?"

"I did not force you to do anything," Violetsky meowed calmly. "You acted with your own will."

"With *your* encouragement!" Dawnpaw shot back. "You can't pretend that you had nothing to do with this, Violetsky. You *gave* me the idea of sneaking away to the battle!"

"That idea was already in your mind, even if you did not know it," Violetsky responded. "I was merely reminding you of that option."

"But why?" Dawnpaw demanded. "Why would you give me the option of doing something that wouldn't fix anything? I went to the battle, and all I did was make things worse!"

"That is not true," Violetsky growled. "Without your help, Adderstar surely would have lost more than one life."

"Grayleaf doesn't think so," Dawnpaw retorted miserably. "She thinks I wasn't any help at all. Only a burden."

"Did she ever say that?" Violetsky returned. "No. Grayleaf is only upset that you didn't obey her, and risked your life. But medicine

cats are allowed to step past some boundaries for the good of their Clan."

"But this wasn't for the good of anything!" Dawnpaw wailed. "Can't you see that?"

In that moment Violetsky seemed to lose her patience. She marched up to Dawnpaw and thrust her muzzle in her face, blue eyes glimmering fiercely with starlight. "Right now, all I can see is a medicine cat who needs to stop blaming herself for everything and realize the great impact she has on her Clan."

Dawnpaw lowered her head, knowing deep down that she was right. But how could she stop blaming herself when this really was all her fault?

She managed to meet Violetsky's eyes again. "Why are you here?" she murmured. "There's nothing forcing you to keep visiting me like this, but here you are."

Violetsky seemed to soften, returning to her usual gentle self. "I am here because you need someone to remind you that you do not have to face everything alone. I am here to show you that even StarClan themselves are with you, no matter how dark the future may seem. And even when you understand that, I will still be here."

"And why is that?"

"Because you have a friend in StarClan. A very, very good friend."

Dawnpaw felt warm from ears to tail-tip, and closed her eyes. She had been narrow-minded to think that she had to deal with everything by herself. She was born in a Clan filled with good cats that cared deeply about her. It had existed for more seasons than anyone could count. And its ancestors, including Violetsky, lived on, helping their descendants find their way in Clan life, so that nothing might strike them down.

She opened her eyes, and Violetsky was gone.

But a voice echoed in her mind, still. *In your darkest hour, remember this: you are not, and will never be, alone.*

Dawnpaw took a long, deep breath. She had no idea how her mindset could change in just a few moments like that, but it didn't really matter to her. All that mattered now was that SunClan would always be with her, and so would StarClan. And as long as she had that, everything would be okay in the end.

"Just a little further now. And be careful, for StarClan's sake!"

Grayleaf's voice startled Dawnpaw out of her reverie. She glanced at the entrance to the medicine den and saw flickering shadows that told of approaching cats. *She must have some warriors bringing Adderstar in. I'd better finish getting all the supplies ready.*

She turned away and continued separating the things Grayleaf would need from the rest of the piles. Suddenly she could smell Adderstar, along with two other cats: Thrushtail and Thumpstep. *Probably the ones carrying Adderstar.*

"Dawnpaw, do you have everything I need ready?" Grayleaf's raspy mew carried traces of that familiar angry tone. Dawnpaw tried not to let it bother her.

"Yes, it's all here. Cobwebs, marigold, poppy..."

"Good. I'll take it from here." Grayleaf ushered her out of the way. "I need you to go and check over the rest of the cats who fought and bring me the ones who need healing the most."

"All right." Dawnpaw nodded and trotted out of the den, noticing Thumpstep and Thrushtail carefully lowering Adderstar's limp form into one of the vacant nests. *StarClan, help him come back as strong as he was before,* she prayed.

The clearing was even more crowded than before, with the battle patrol surrounded by almost every other cat. She noticed Quickstorm and Patchflower fussing happily over Rosethorn, who looked happy as well—but rather overwhelmed—and purred with amusement. But then she saw Duskheart and Shinefur, looking around with confusion.

"Where's Minnowtail?" Shinefur meowed, silencing the chatter of

the other cats.

"She was on the patrol, too," Duskheart added.

Dawnpaw scanned the crowd, suddenly realizing that Minnowtail was indeed missing. *I hadn't even noticed until now. Where is she?*

She watched Shadowpool emerge from the crowd and approach his parents. His amber eyes were dark with sadness.

"Minnowtail...didn't come back with us," he meowed slowly.

"What do you mean?" Shinefur demanded. "Is she following the rogues? Why?"

Shadowpool shook his head, silent with despair. Dawnpaw began to get the sense that something was really wrong.

"Shinefur...Duskheart...Minnowtail left. She left SunClan. And joined the rogues."

Gasps rippled through the entire Clan like water in a flooding stream. Dawnpaw felt frozen in shock. *She did* what*?*

Shinefur shook her head, her pelt bristling. "No," she hissed. "Tell me what *really* happened to my daughter!"

"Minnowtail would never do such a thing," Duskheart growled.

Hazelfrost padded up to stand beside Shadowpool. "I'm afraid it's true," she murmured. "We all saw it. Minnowtail betrayed SunClan and joined the rogues' side just before the battle began."

"She'd put so much thought into it, and I didn't even know!" Shadowpool wailed. "She was so certain. I still can't believe it...my own sister..."

He trailed off, bowing his head and trembling with grief.

A faint memory stirred in the back of Dawnpaw's mind. Rosethorn, sharing prey with her back when she was an apprentice too. Her worried expression as she confessed her suspicions...about

Minnowpaw!

My sister had suspected that Minnowtail would do this right from the start!

At first it had seemed like a far-fetched idea, that one of SunClan's own would really do something like that. But slowly, Minnowtail continued showing signs of being treacherous until Dawnpaw herself began to question her loyalty. But it was too late, and she had exposed her own treachery before anyone else could.

Suddenly Dawnpaw realized Rosethorn was looking at her; she met her gaze grimly. *You were right*, she told her sister silently. *No one you told would listen, but you were right all along.*

"You're lying!" Shinefur cried. "We're talking about my *daughter*! I raised her to be strong and loyal! She wouldn't dare do this to her Clan!"

Duskheart was silent, as if finally beginning to consider that this was true.

"We would not lie about this to you," Rosethorn said quietly. "She's gone."

Shinefur's legs buckled beneath her, and she collapsed with a low wail of grief. Instantly Shadowpool and Duskheart stooped down to comfort her.

She needs something to curb her grief, Dawnpaw thought. She bounded towards the broken family.

"Let me take her to Grayleaf," she whispered to Duskheart. "She needs herbs to help her calm down."

Duskheart backed away from Shinefur, as did Shadowpool. "That would be best," the former croaked, not meeting Dawnpaw's eyes.

As she guided the heartbroken she-cat towards the medicine den, Dawnpaw wondered if Minnowtail realized the sheer impact her decision had on the entire Clan. Her betrayal had cut deep into many cats. No amount of cobwebs could stop this wound from

bleeding; no amount of time or herbs could ever mend something so cruel and broken.

* * *

A faint rustling woke Dawnpaw. Her eyes blinked open. The first things she noticed were bright moonlight shining through the medicine den entrance, and a fluffy tail outlined in silver whisking away just outside.

She raised her head sleepily and looked around. Adderstar was fast asleep in his nest, breathing steadily. Earlier that day he had woken up with his new life, but had been too weak to stay conscious for long. After he fell asleep Grayleaf had told Dawnpaw that he only had three lives left now.

She had been warned not to tell any other cats, in or out of SunClan. "No one else needs to know or worry," she had said. "As far as they're concerned right now, SunClan's leader is still strong with many seasons ahead of him."

Dawnpaw had nodded, promising her mentor that she wasn't planning on telling any cat.

Now she glanced at Grayleaf's nest, and was surprised to find it empty. She recalled the tail she had seen outside the den. *Perhaps that had been her? What's she doing up so late? She worked hard today. She needs to rest.*

Dawnpaw rose from her own nest as quietly as she could, not wanting to disturb Adderstar. Her curiosity had the better of her; she wanted to see what Grayleaf was doing, if only for a moment.

The camp was peacefully quiet. The only sounds were that of gently snoring cats, and several crickets chirping idly. Above, Silverpelt shone beautifully in the black sky, and the moon—almost to its halfway point—shed moonlight upon the empty clearing.

Then Dawnpaw saw the cat again, this time leaving camp through the fern tunnel. Its fur was nearly white in the moonlight, but she could still tell it was Grayleaf. She followed quickly and quietly,

wondering what the spotted she-cat was up to.

Outside the camp, the forest looked strange and eerie. Dawnpaw had never been out in the forest at night. There was no wind, but the leaf-bare chill was stronger than ever. She shivered, fluffing up her pelt in a vain attempt to keep warm.

The forest canopy covered the moon, and now it was too dark to see Grayleaf. But Dawnpaw could still smell her, and began following her scent trail. She seemed to be heading in the direction of the Sun Oak, but not directly towards it.

The gurgling sound of a stream up ahead—and the telltale stench—told her she was getting close to the FireClan border. It was difficult to keep track of Grayleaf's scent now. *How do warriors do this on a daily basis?* Dawnpaw wondered incredulously.

But eventually the undergrowth thinned out to reveal Grayleaf. She had her back turned to Dawnpaw, sitting by the stream at the FireClan border.

What is she doing so close to the border? she wondered. *If there's a FireClan cat still out and about, she could get in trouble!*

"Sorry I woke you." Grayleaf's voice nearly made her jump out of her pelt. The old she-cat turned her head to look at Dawnpaw, whiskers twitching.

"It's nothing." Dawnpaw took a few pawsteps closer to her. "What are you doing? You shouldn't be so close to the border like that."

"I haven't crossed it," Grayleaf pointed out. "No cat has any reason to challenge me."

"Well, we *are* talking about FireClan."

"Good point." Grayleaf looked away. "And I've realized that I don't actually acknowledge the good points you make very often."

"What are you meowing about?" Dawnpaw asked, bemused.

"Don't make this hard on me, Dawnpaw," Grayleaf mewed;

Dawnpaw could just *hear* her eyes roll. "You know what I'm saying."

"Is this about Adderstar?" she asked. "You don't have to apologize for that. I know what I did was wrong. I disobeyed you..."

She trailed off when Grayleaf stood and turned around to face her. She almost looked like a spirit of StarClan, her fur silver with faint moonlight and her blue eyes glowing.

"No, I was the one that was wrong," she meowed. "I was afraid of some rogue cat mauling you like they had Pineclaw, and I let that fear cloud my judgement. It was foolish of me. The truth is, if you had listened to me and stayed in camp, Adderstar might have lost two, maybe *three* lives. He could have died altogether."

Dawnpaw was touched by how much her mentor cared. But she shook her head. "I didn't do much, as I'm sure you noticed," she admitted. "I didn't have nearly as much cobweb as I needed, and not much marigold, either. I hadn't put a single herb on his neck wound before he stopped breathing."

"The cobwebs did more than you realize," Grayleaf responded. "They slowed the bleeding and kept him from losing all his blood. And without enough blood, there wouldn't have been a good body for his spirit to return to in the first place."

"So I really did help?"

"Yes," Grayleaf chuckled. "Yes, you did. And from now on I should be taking you seriously. You might still be a 'paw, but you're far from the cat you were when you were first apprenticed to me. I know you're not little anymore, and I'll stop treating you like you are."

Dawnpaw felt so warm with happiness and pride that not even the cold night air could chill her now. She bounded up to Grayleaf and touched noses with her.

"Thank you. I promise I'll keep learning everything you have to teach me. If I'm half the medicine cat you are, it'll be because of you."

Grayleaf blinked warmly at her. "Let's get back to camp now," she mewed. "It's freezing out here. And we have a lot of work to do in the morning, so we'd best get some sleep."

Chapter 38

"I'm telling you, it's not as bad as it looks! Go help a cat who needs it more than me, I don't mind waiting."

Rosethorn rolled her eyes good-humoredly as Dawnpaw gave her an irritated look. Her sister had refused to check over any other cats until she had been checked, so matter what she had told her. Sure, Rosethorn looked beat up from the battle, but so did every other warrior that had been on the patrol. And none of her bites or scratches really bothered her. *I'm sure some of these cats are actually hurting. Dawnpaw should stop fussing over me and go see them instead!*

"All right," Dawnpaw conceded at last, "you look decent enough for a cat that was clawing someone else's fur off yesterday."

"My thoughts exactly."

Dawnpaw rolled her eyes, though she was purring quietly. "Just wait here until everyone else is checked over, so Grayleaf can decide who to treat first."

"Okay," Rosethorn mewed. She waved her tail towards the rest of the injured cats lined up in the clearing, some of which had already been examined by Grayleaf.

Dawnpaw twitched her ears in farewell as she trotted away.

Rosethorn wondered idly if the rogues had some kind of medicine cat to treat their wounds. *I wonder how Minnowtail is settling in with her new friends,* she thought bitterly. *Probably pretty well, considering she doesn't seem to give a mousetail about SunClan anymore.*

It was hard to get used to Minnowtail being gone, despite Rosethorn's mild contentment at her departure—a feeling that she kept hidden for the rest of the Clan's sake. Many couldn't accept the fact that the silver tabby she-cat was a traitor.

Shinefur was an example of that. Duskheart had been able to continue with his warrior duties, at least, but Shinefur was absolutely devastated by her daughter's actions. It was the morning after the battle, and she had barely eaten anything. She hadn't volunteered for any patrols, either, despite usually being one of the first cats to volunteer.

If I was her, Rosethorn thought, *I would want to keep busy as a distraction. But she doesn't seem to want to do anything now.*

"Hey, Rosethorn." She was broken out of her thoughts when Nightshade padded up to her and sat down beside her. "Have you been checked yet?"

"I was the first cat Dawnpaw examined," Rosethorn meowed, glancing at her hardworking sister with a mixture of exasperation and fondness. "What about you?"

"Not yet. I slept in a little late, and just got done bringing some prey to Shinefur."

"Oh. That was nice of you."

"Yeah. Whether she'll actually eat or not, I have no idea."

Nightshade looked towards the nursery. Rosethorn followed his gaze and saw Shinefur crouched beside it, staring blankly at a small squirrel that sat in front of her.

"She can't afford to starve herself right now," Rosethorn murmured worriedly. "Prey is getting scrawnier and scarcer by the day, and it's only getting colder. If she gets sick, it'll be hard for her to recover."

"I'm sure she'll realize that soon," Nightshade replied. "But you can't help sympathizing with her. She lost her own daughter, who turned out to be a traitor. I can't even imagine how that must feel."

Rosethorn suddenly recalled something Minnowtail had said after the battle had ended. *Now that I'm gone, Shinefur and Duskheart can dedicate all their time to Shadowpool. But it's not like they'll be doing anything different, there.* The fact that she'd said that was confusing, because Shinefur clearly looked devastated by her leaving. If

Shinefur never really cared for Minnowtail, then why would she be so upset about her leaving?

"It's strange," she muttered out loud, half to herself.

Nightshade glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember Minnowtail saying that Shinefur and Duskheart could spend all their time with Shadowpool once she was gone?"

"Vaguely." Nightshade twitched an ear. "What are you getting at?"

"She made it sound like her parents didn't really care about her that much," Rosethorn pointed out. "Like they spent all their time with Shadowpool and hardly gave her any attention."

"I never noticed," Nightshade meowed thoughtfully. "Although, then again, I wasn't really paying attention to that sort of thing."

"You'd think that Shinefur wouldn't be as upset as she is if she never really paid Minnowtail any mind."

"Well, neglected or not, Minnowtail is still her daughter. Those kinds of feelings trump everything in the end."

"I suppose."

Staring at Nightshade, Rosethorn noticed him wince a little, pain briefly lighting his eyes. "What's that bothering you?"

"A wound on my back that I can't get to," Nightshade admitted. "It wasn't bothering me before, but now I think there's some dirt in it and it stings."

"Why didn't you say something, mouse-brain?" Rosethorn stood up to walk over to him. "Here, I'll clean it for you."

As she started cleaning her friend's wound with gentle licks, Nightshade purred. "Thanks. That's a lot better already."

"A wise and sometimes cranky medicine cat once told me to know when to ask for help," Rosethorn meowed between licks, laughter in

her voice. "And when she gets mad at you for not telling her before, don't come running to me!"

Nightshade purred with laughter. "Maybe Dawnpaw will be more sympathetic than you."

"Seriously, though, I hope this doesn't get infected. That wouldn't be pretty."

"I think it'll be okay." Nightshade shrugged.

Rosethorn finished cleaning her friend's wound and briskly forced him to go see Grayleaf directly, wanting to make sure that his wound wouldn't get infected. Then she began licking her own wounds, knowing it would be a little while before she would see a medicine cat for real treatment. Some of the other warriors were hurt worse than her during the battle.

Glancing up while she was grooming, she suddenly noticed Shadowpool sitting by himself beside the fresh-kill pile. He was nibbling on a tiny thrush, but his pelt looked matted, and his eyes were dull with sadness.

He's thinking about his sister, Rosethorn realized, gazing at him sympathetically. *I should go talk to him.*

Quietly she padded over to him and sat beside him. A twitch of his ear showed that he knew she was there, but he didn't look up from the thrush.

Finally he spoke. "I smelled her on the border that day, with you. I wondered if she was into some serious trouble instead of the typical talking back to senior warriors or eating too much prey from the pile, but I didn't think about it hard enough to see the truth. Even in my own sister. And then, just like that, every suspicion I could have had, suspicions that might've saved SunClan a lot of trouble...it all came true."

He scoffed with angry ruefulness. "Funny how things work out like that."

Rosethorn gazed at her friend, wishing he wouldn't blame this all

on himself. *After all, it's not his fault. It's not the fault of anyone here. This is all on Minnowtail.*

"Come hunting with me," she meowed at last.

"What?" Now Shadowpool looked at her, seeming confused.

"You heard me. I think we could both use some fresh air, and the Clan could use some fresh prey." Rosethorn nudged his shoulder with her paw, urging him to get up, and then sprinted towards the fern tunnel.

She paused just outside camp, and turned to check if Shadowpool was following her. At first she thought he hadn't come, but the shadow of a cat appeared among the ferns, and the smoky gray tom emerged from the tunnel. He still looked confused, but at least a little more lively.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Rosethorn mewed casually. "We're just hunting like warriors normally do. Unless you haven't done that before?"

"O-of course I have," Shadowpool stammered. "Rosethorn, what are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to get you to stop feeling sorry for yourself," Rosethorn answered. "Sulking around the camp won't fix anything, and it certainly won't fill hungry bellies. So we should get to work; come on!"

She spun around and raced off into the forest without checking to see if Shadowpool was following her. This time she didn't have to; moments later she could see his dark shape from the corner of her eye, determinedly keeping pace with her. Satisfaction warmed her as much as the air rushing past her. *That's the spirit, Shadowpool!*

"I bet you couldn't beat me to the Sun Oak!" she challenged playfully.

She was surprised—and very happy—to hear Shadowpool respond, "Don't make bets that you can't back up!" And the next thing she knew was the dark tom slowly pulling ahead of her. Rosethorn

gasped, pushing her paws harder against the cold earth in an attempt to keep up. *He's almost as fast as Nightshade!*

That thought took her mind back to the days moons ago, when she and Nightshade were still apprentices. She remembered the races they would always have both in and out of camp after they were done with training. Nightshade would always tease her because he was much faster than her. Then the races would break down into playfights, which Rosethorn would almost always win.

Thorns of sadness pierced her heart, sharper than she'd expected. *I didn't realize how much I really missed those days, back when we were still that close. Back when everything was simple, and there was nothing that could tear us apart...*

Rosethorn supposed she could only pray that SunClan could eventually drive the rogues away from their territory once and for all. Then they would only have leaf-bare to worry about, and after that...they could be happy, *truly* happy. Sure, there had been fun moments once in a while, but no cat in SunClan had been relaxed or content in a long time.

All of a sudden something hard slammed into her paws, and with a yowl of surprise and pain she went tumbling into the ground with several loud *thumps*. When she finally had a grip on the ground with her claws, there were dust clouds around her and her body ached. *Ugh, I should have been paying attention to where I was going!*

"Rosethorn! What in StarClan's name happened to you?" She saw Shadowpool come running back towards her with worry in his eyes.

"I tripped," Rosethorn grunted simply. "Am I bleeding anywhere? Did any of my wounds open?"

She waited while Shadowpool circled her, sniffing her fur carefully two or three times. Eventually he shook his head and mewed, "Everything looks good to me. Somehow you only ended up with bruises."

"That's good," Rosethorn sighed, shifting to make herself more comfortable.

"Are you okay? Should we head back to camp?"

"No, we still need to hunt. I'm okay, really. I just need to rest for a minute."

Shadowpool's ears perked up, and he glanced at a nearby bramble bush. Suddenly he shot towards it, thrusting his front paws beneath the brambles. Rosethorn heard a loud, terrified squeal, quickly cut off. Shadowpool scooted backwards and turned back to her, the mouse hanging proudly from his jaws.

"Great catch!" Rosethorn purred. Part of her was glad that he hadn't gotten stuck in the brambles like she had when she was collecting moss with Nightshade as apprentices. *Then we really would've had to go back to camp!*

"Want to share it?" Shadowpool offered. "We aren't on a hunting patrol."

The sight of the mouse did make Rosethorn's mouth water, and her belly growl quietly. She hadn't eaten anything today, mostly because she just hadn't been hungry. This fresh-kill was the fattest she had seen in a while. And it was true that she and Shadowpool were hunting on their own time, not because they had been told to. It wasn't breaking the warrior code to eat it themselves.

But Rosethorn shook her head firmly. "No, thanks. We should probably take it back to camp along with whatever else we can catch. The Clan as a whole needs it more than we do."

"You're right," Shadowpool conceded. "I'll bury this so we can come back for it later. Do you think you're ready to keep going?"

"Yeah, let's go." Rosethorn stood up, stretching deeply to loosen her muscles. She followed behind Shadowpool as he led the rest of the way to the Sun Oak.

"Minnowtail wasn't the only thing I was thinking about, back at camp," her friend sighed after a while.

"What else was bothering you?" Rosethorn prompted.

"I was thinking...about where my sister would go after she died."

Rosethorn pricked her ears. *That was unexpected!* And the dark gray warrior did have a point; now that Minnowtail wasn't a Clan cat anymore, did she really have a right to enter StarClan when she died?

In the back of her mind she realized that Minnowtail's betrayal of SunClan *did* technically mean she would be forced to enter the Dark Forest—the opposite of StarClan, which the worst of the Clan cats were doomed to wander after death, until they were forgotten by the living and their spirits faded into nothing. But she didn't dare to tell Shadowpool that his own sister might end up there. *Besides, the Dark Forest counts as a Clan afterlife as well. If Minnowtail left SunClan, then maybe she wouldn't be allowed into the Dark Forest, either.*

But then...would her spirit have *anywhere* to go?

The idea of not having a place for her own spirit to go chilled Rosethorn to the bone. Would she be stuck in some dark void forever? Would she have to wander Clan territories, searching helplessly for a way into StarClan? No cat deserved that kind of fate—not even Minnowtail.

"I don't know where she might end up, Shadowpool," she murmured at last. "All I know is that all the Clan cats before her—good or bad—will judge that for her, in the end."

Chapter 39

"Only one more to go. Hold still." Dawnpaw gently parted Ebonypelt's dark fur until she could clearly see the rather large claw wound on her shoulder. The senior warrior was one of many cats she had treated today. After all, some wounds needed lots of time to properly heal; and even several sunrises after the battle against the rogues, many warriors still needed to have their injuries checked over again to make sure all was well.

Bending down to get closer to the wound, she spat the marigold pulp she had been chewing onto Ebonypelt's wound, wincing inwardly at the herb's bitter taste. She began licking at the pulp, spreading it thoroughly until it coated the entire scratch. Since it wasn't bleeding at all, she sat back on her haunches, satisfied with her work.

"All right, you're all done. Just take it easy for the rest of the day so the pulp doesn't get scraped off, and so the scratch doesn't start to bleed again."

"Okay," Ebonypelt mewed. "I've been on plenty of patrols today, anyways. I'm worn out!" She twisted to sniff the scratch Dawnpaw had just treated. "It's not even hurting anymore. Thanks, you're doing a great job!"

Dawnpaw purred, proud that a senior warrior had complimented her. In fact, it seemed that every warrior was beginning to respect her even more. Grayleaf had decided to give her the responsibility of checking over every cat that had been injured in the battle while she did the other medicine cat duties. Dawnpaw had assumed it was some kind of test of her knowledge and skills—although she didn't know for sure why her mentor wanted to test her like this.

Even so, she had gladly accepted the responsibility, pleased at being able to show the whole Clan that she was a good medicine cat. And the Clan was definitely starting to take notice!

Now, as Ebonypelt exited the den, Grayleaf brushed past her to enter.

"How's Brokenstem?" Dawnpaw prompted her mentor.

"Not great, but he's better," Grayleaf answered. "It seems the cold has been affecting his joints more than any other cat in the Clan. Hopefully that comfrey I lined his nest with will help a little."

"Well, he doesn't leave the elders' den much these days. He shouldn't be getting as cold as he is—do you think it's the moss?" The younger warriors like Shadowpool and Robinfeather had been tasked with collecting moss for nests and occasionally doing the elders' ticks, until Rainfoot's kits were apprenticed. It was possible some of them hadn't been paying attention, and brought back wet moss by accident. Sleeping on wet moss was an easy way for an elder to start having achy joints, especially in leaf-bare.

If that's the case, I'm sure it wasn't Rosethorn. She might be an impulsive furball, but she'd make sure the moss she collects is good.

"No, it's not the moss," Grayleaf responded. "I checked for that when I lined his nest with the comfrey, and it was dry. Perhaps the den itself needs to be reinforced. It's been a while since the walls have been patched up."

"We should have some warriors check for any damage and fix what they find. The less holes in the den walls, the warmer it is inside."

"Yes, they can do it while we're gone at the half-moon meeting."

Dawnpaw gasped. "Wait, that's *tonight*? I hadn't even realized!"

Grayleaf chuckled. "Perhaps you lost track of time with all your work. But yes, it's tonight. And it's also about time we got going; the sun's starting to set."

"I'm ready to go," Dawnpaw meowed, suddenly feeling much more energized from her excitement. "I talked to Icepaw a lot at the last Gathering—Leafstripe's new apprentice, remember? She seemed shy, but she was nice and seemed really excited about being a medicine cat. I can't wait to see her again."

"Today will be a special day for her," Grayleaf added. "Her true ceremony at the Starfalls is tonight as well."

Dawnpaw remembered her first visit to the Starfalls, and the magic of her ceremony and her first glimpse at StarClan's hunting grounds. She envied Icepaw for that, wishing she could experience that kind of excitement and wonder a second time. Although it would be nice to see her reaction when she saw the Starfalls for the first time.

"Well, enough dilly-dallying," Grayleaf went on. "Come, we don't want to be late!"

* * *

Dawnpaw glanced around MoonClan territory, slightly envious of their pine trees that never lost their greenery, even in leaf-bare. She was starting to feel exposed and vulnerable now that she could clearly see the sky above her back in SunClan territory. Beneath her paws were more pine needles that created a soft, springy cushion on the forest floor. She could hear the quiet sounds of crickets and frogs chirping and moving about, bringing her a relaxed sense of peace.

"I can smell Leafstripe up ahead," Grayleaf reported. "Icepaw, too."

"I can't smell anything except all this pine sap," Dawnpaw snorted.

"Greetings, Grayleaf!" Leafstripe suddenly pushed her way out of some holly bushes up ahead. Icepaw came out shortly after, her pale gray tabby pelt clearly visible, and her dark green eyes glowing excitedly.

"Hello, Leafstripe," Grayleaf purred. Turning to Icepaw, she added, "And welcome, Icepaw. Are you ready for tonight?"

"I hope so," Icepaw mewed. She looked doubtful, but the determination in her eyes showed how dedicated she was.

"Come walk beside me," Dawnpaw offered in a friendly tone. Icepaw gladly fell in beside her as the four medicine cats continued towards the edge of Clan territory.

"How are things in SunClan?" Leafstripe prompted. "I hope the chill isn't too much of a bother."

"It's not the chill that I'm worried about," Grayleaf meowed. "Not in particular. "Adderstar launched a counterattack against the rogues that have been trespassing, hoping to drive them away for good."

"I'm guessing something bad happened." Leafstripe's round eyes were dark with sympathy.

"One of the rogues ended up getting killed, but Adderstar was also badly injured." Grayleaf shook her head. "He's recovering well, but he lost a life."

"That's horrible," Leafstripe murmured. "I'm sorry. I'm glad to hear that he's doing better now, though."

"Me too. In fact, Dawnpaw has been a huge help with everything." Grayleaf glanced over her shoulder at her apprentice, warmth and pride lighting her gaze. "She's taken care of all the other injured warriors while I've healed Adderstar and checked over the elders. Without her, I would have my paws full for sure."

"That's good to hear," Leafstripe purred. "I've already seen for myself how dedicated she is."

Dawnpaw tingled with happiness. *Even the other medicine cats are happy with me!*

Beside her, Icepaw whispered, "Grayleaf sure seems to like you. I hope Leafstripe likes me, too."

"Of course she likes you," Dawnpaw replied. "You're going to do great, and then she'll have all the more reason to be proud of you."

"Maybe." Icepaw stared ahead. "I'll just have to work extra hard with my training."

"Are you excited to see the Starfalls?"

"Oh, yes! Leafstripe always tells me about how beautiful it is. She says that, on clear nights, the moon turns the water silver, like

liquid starlight."

"She wasn't lying," Dawnpaw purred. "You can take that from me!"

"What's it like, having responsibility over all those warriors?" Icepaw shot her a brief look of admiration. "I mean, Grayleaf said that you've been taking care of all the injured warriors from that battle."

"Well, she still helps me with a few things," Dawnpaw admitted. "One of our senior warriors, Thumpstep, had his ear torn, and it wouldn't stop bleeding. I couldn't figure out how to put the cobwebs on the wound without it muffling his hearing, so Grayleaf did it instead and showed me what to do."

"But you still have the responsibility of checking all the injuries every day, and making sure nothing's wrong. Does it ever get stressful?"

"Sometimes." Dawnpaw twitched her whiskers. "You just have to learn to trust yourself. You have to be certain that you know what you're doing. Otherwise, the cats you're treating will never trust you to do the right thing."

"Leafstripe tells me sometimes that I need to be more sure of myself," Icepaw murmured. "She says I'm learning quickly, but that I second-guess myself even when I'm doing something right."

"When I first became a medicine cat," Dawnpaw meowed, "I always felt like I didn't really know what I was doing, even when I was treating something as minor as a cracked pad or a bramble scratch. I guess it's normal. All I can say is, the more you practice and get used to the herbs you work with, the easier it'll get. And eventually you'll know exactly what you have to do."

"Thanks, Dawnpaw." Icepaw's tail swished back and forth, showing her renewed sense of confidence. "I'll work really hard. Soon there won't be any wound or sickness in my Clan that I can't treat!"

"That's the spirit," Dawnpaw purred. "Always remember that your Clan is what matters above everything else."

Icepaw reminded her a lot of herself when she was just a kit, filled with an ambition to be the best medicine cat she could possibly be for her Clan. Soon that ambition would melt into a calm sense of responsibility, a feeling that she would need to be there for her Clan no matter what. And there wasn't anything wrong with that!

Along the way they found Palefeather, who was waiting for them beside MoonClan's border with WaterClan. Pineshadow was crouched a couple tail-lengths behind him, shivering with cold.

"Are you all right?" Leafstripe asked worriedly.

"I'll be fine," Pineshadow grunted. "The downside of having to travel through WaterClan territory for the half-moon meeting is that the water in the marsh is ice-cold, and I can never tell where I'm putting my paws!"

"WaterClan's thick pelts are better suited for all the cold water," Palefeather admitted. "But he's dry now. A nice run would warm him up."

"We should probably run anyways," Grayleaf snorted. "It's almost moonhigh. We can't be late."

"Then let's get going," Leafstripe mewed. "We can start running once we get out of Clan territory and onto the moors."

As the group, now whole, continued their trek, Dawnpaw noticed Grayleaf slow her pace to walk beside Palefeather. She started speaking to him, and Dawnpaw had to strain her ears to hear what her mentor was saying.

"...about Gorsepaw. That must have been a hard loss for the Clan."

"He was so young," Palefeather whispered hoarsely. Dawnpaw had never heard him sound so grief-stricken. "Too young. I know there was nothing any cat could do, but...still..."

"What happened wasn't your fault, or any cat's fault," Grayleaf murmured. Her fur brushed Palefeather's comfortingly. "You cannot blame yourself for something you couldn't control. Besides, I think Gorsepaw will be very happy in StarClan."

"I know all that," Palefeather responded, "deep down inside me." He glanced at Grayleaf softly. "I guess hearing it from you makes it a bit easier to remember."

Grayleaf returned his gaze, giving him a shake of her head. It was so small and brief that Dawnpaw almost thought she'd imagined it. Palefeather blinked in response; it seemed some unspoken message had passed between the two medicine cats. And, just like that, Grayleaf pulled ahead to walk beside Leafstripe again. Palefeather slid over to Pineshadow and started up a conversation with him.

Dawnpaw blinked several times, feeling quite confused. *What was that all about?* Grayleaf had known Palefeather for a long time; perhaps there was some kind of inside thing that only they understood.

Mentally she shrugged. She couldn't understand it, and it didn't seem too important, so why obsess over it?

"We're almost there," Leafstripe called. "Icepaw, come here. You can be the first to see the Starfalls tonight."

"Okay!" Icepaw scurried away, slowing down when she was at the front of the group. Dawnpaw could see the familiar slope that led down to the hollow where the Starfalls lay. The willow trees that normally disguised the stream were now bare and leafless. It seemed a little sad, but hardly took away from the grove's sheer beauty.

An astonished gasp from Icepaw told Dawnpaw the young apprentice had just seen the hollow. Up ahead Leafstripe turned to look at Dawnpaw.

"Go to her," the pretty she-cat whispered. "Tell her about the whispers."

Fluffing her pelt with excitement—and because it was freezing out—Dawnpaw trotted forward to stand beside an awestruck Icepaw.

"I-I knew it would be pretty, but *this*..." The gray tabby shook her head slowly, incredulously, at the sight that stood before her. "This

almost doesn't seem real."

"Listen very closely," Dawnpaw uttered. "If you do, you'll be able to hear them."

"Who's 'them?'"

"Listen." Closing her eyes, Dawnpaw could already begin to hear StarClan gathering invisibly in the hollow. Their whispers of secrets yet to be revealed wreathed around her comfortingly. At the same time, it seemed a little eerie. *I wonder if StarClan is unsettled?*

She recalled Violetsky telling her that nearly every StarClan spirit was anxious about the meaning of the prophecy. Perhaps that's why they sounded like this. *If only Sunstar had told someone in StarClan about the prophecy,* she thought. *It would've saved both the living* and *the dead a lot of trouble.*

Icepaw gasped beside her, green eyes shining with wonder. "I can hear them!" Then she ducked her head. "Well, I can't really tell what they're saying, but I know they're here."

"You'll be able to hear them clearly enough when they enter your dreams," Leafstripe purred, licking her apprentice's ear.

"The moon has almost apexed," Pineshadow meowed. "We should get down into the hollow."

The higher the half-moon climbed, the more the Starfalls hollow was washed in an ethereal white glow. Dawnpaw found that, no matter how many times she'd been here—even now, when the willow trees above the pool were cold and bare—this place had never lost its beauty to her.

The medicine cats gathered in their usual half-circle at the edge of the pool. Every cat crouched, except for Leafstripe and Icepaw, who were getting ready for the latter's ceremony.

"Icepaw," Leafstripe began. "Is it your wish to enter the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?"

Icepaw swallowed nervously. But her voice rang out clearly. "It is."

"Then come forward," Leafstripe flicked her tail in the direction of the Starfalls pool. Icepaw inched closer to it, trembling with excitement.

"Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice," Leafstripe went on. "She has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant her your wisdom and insight so that she may understand your ways and heal her Clan in accordance with your will."

"Let it be so," Palefeather murmured.

"Lap up a few drops of the water, then lay down," Leafstripe mewed to Icepaw.

"Wait. There is one more ceremony I'd like to perform."

All the cats turned to stare at Grayleaf, the one who had spoken. The old medicine cat's eyes were fixed on Dawnpaw.

"I think my apprentice has earned her full medicine cat name."

Dawnpaw stared incredulously at her mentor. Her throat felt dry with shock. *I thought I would have known when this was coming!*

"B-but I'm nowhere near ready!" she protested. "I still have so much to learn from you!"

"Medicine cat training is not the same as a warrior's," Grayleaf meowed. "Just because you have received your name, doesn't mean you are no longer my apprentice. Medicine cats never stop learning."

"What made you decide I was ready?" Dawnpaw whispered.

"You have shown your connection to StarClan is strong. You are undyingly loyal to SunClan, and your skill at healing has saved the lives of many cats." Grayleaf blinked at her. "I have seen all three for myself."

"I agree," Palefeather added. "Dawnpaw is more than ready."

"She is already a wonderful healer," Leafstripe purred.

"Well..." Dawnpaw took a deep, elated breath. "If you all think I am ready, then I accept."

"Good." Grayleaf gazed warmly at her. Then she lifted her head to the sky, her eyes reflecting the moon and the stars clearly.

"I, Grayleaf, medicine cat of SunClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of a medicine cat, and with your help she will serve her Clan for many moons.

"Dawnpaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

Even now Dawnpaw could feel Violetsky's presence beside her, though her spirit was invisible. She lifted her chin. "I do," she answered.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your true name as a medicine cat," Grayleaf meowed. "Dawnpaw, from this moment you will be known as Dawnfire. StarClan honors your skill and dedication, and we welcome you as a full medicine cat of SunClan."

"Dawnfire!" Icepaw squealed happily, obviously proud of her new friend. The rest of the medicine cats took up the cheer moments later. But what made the newly named Dawnfire the happiest was that she could hear StarClan themselves, whispering her name like echoes off of the hollow's walls. *Dawnfire! Dawnfire!*

"Now that both ceremonies have been concluded," Leafstripe mewed, "we can begin."

Still quivering with joy, Dawnfire bent her head to drink from the shining pool along with the rest of the medicine cats.

A chill passed through her the moment her tongue touched the icy water, and suddenly she found it difficult to stay awake. Closing her eyes, she let the sudden wave of sleep overtake her, and she slipped into a dream.

Dawnfire found herself in a tiny, grassy clearing surrounded by lush

trees and ferns. A warm breeze ruffled her pelt and filled her nose with scents of plant and prey. At the center of the clearing was a small pool of water as clear as the Starfalls pool. It rippled slowly in the wind, reflecting the clear, sunny sky above.

Looking around curiously, Dawnfire wondered if a StarClan cat was going to show up. Perhaps Violetsky would come to her again? Or maybe some other spirit she'd never met before. But the longer she waited in the silence, the more she suspected that no spirits were coming to her. Not yet, at least.

She stood, padding over to the small pool. As she approached it, the wind abruptly ceased. The water stopped rippling, and now she could clearly see her reflection staring blankly back at her.

Dawnfire shivered. The last time she'd seen her reflection in a StarClan dream, half of her face had been scorched and mutilated by a raging fire. That had been moons ago, now, but the horrific things she had seen that day had changed her. She never knew for certain if it had been a good change or not. But that didn't matter now; her reflection now was as normal as it should've been.

But then she noticed something strange in the sky. Its pale blue color was fading into a dark gray, the sun beginning to fade. Before she could tear her eyes away from the water, an acrid tang filled her nostrils, a smell that was all too familiar. *Fire!*

Dawnfire's head snapped up, and she gasped when she saw the relentless orange flames that turned everything they touched into crumbling ashes. She stumbled backwards in shock, reeling at how quickly the peaceful clearing had become so deadly.

Something caught her eye that she had not seen before. In the grass stood a single, scarlet red rose, in perfect condition as the rest of the forest burned around it. Its stem was shiny, the thorns longer and sharper than any Dawnfire had ever seen on a rose before. The only *really* strange thing about it was that its beautiful petals seemed to be oozing a dark red liquid. It bore a chillingly strong resemblance to blood. The liquid dripped steadily into the grass.

A stream of flame started to approach the rose, like a predator

stalking its prey maliciously. Dawnfire stared in horror at the flower, knowing that it would soon be nothing but ashes in the face of fire. But that was not what happened at all.

As soon as the fire came within a mouse-length of the rose, it died away as quickly as it had appeared. Like a chain reaction, the line of flames quickly faded, as did the rest of the fire that had destroyed the forest. Ashes were rising from the ground, clinging to trees and bushes as they turned beautiful shades of brown and green, repairing the broken forest. The smoke that had darkened the sky dissipated. The sun blazed as bright as ever.

When it was all over, the clearing looked exactly as it had before, with the rose standing tall and proud among it all.

Dawnfire forced herself to stop shaking. She raked her eyes across the scenery, astonished. Lifting her head to look at the sky, she whispered, "What are you trying to tell me?"

In response, the ground shook as it rumbled with the response of StarClan, every spirit's voice joined as one.

Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun.

Chapter 40

Rosethorn was crouched beside Nightshade just outside the warriors' den, trying to contain the kit-like excitement that felt like ants crawling through her fur. She wondered if her old friend was feeling the same way. After, all, there was a chance that both of them could become mentors today.

It had been a little over a moon since the attack on the rogues, and Rosethorn thought SunClan was healing very well. Her sister had received her full medicine cat name not that long ago, to her and their parents' shock and excitement. Dawnfire had definitely deserved it, after all her hard work to make sure every claw scratch or bite from the rogues healed just fine. Despite the typical leaf-bare cold and hunger, every cat was usually in a good mood. There had been no further intrusion from the rogues since the battle.

Whether that meant they were gone for good was still a mystery.

Rumors had been circling the camp that Rainfoot and Birchpelt's kits would be made apprentices this morning, and Rosethorn hoped that was true. She had always longed for an apprentice of her own, to know that one of SunClan's most skilled and honorable warriors had been trained by her. *And I would teach them everything that Pineclaw taught me. I know that would make him proud.*

Her former mentor's death still made her heart ache. But it wasn't as hard to think about now. Spending time with Nightshade and Dawnfire, and occasionally Quickstorm and Patchflower made her feel less lonely. And sometimes she visited his grave after patrols or hunting trips. Sometimes her thoughts would drift to the tiny black-and-white rogue that she was so certain had killed him.

The piece of fur she had found was still tucked safely beneath her nest; though the scent of the rogue tom had faded from it, it was already burned into her mind. A reminder of the mission that she always subconsciously wanted to fulfill. Rosethorn didn't think that she could ever find closure from Pineclaw's murder until she put an

end to the life of the cat who had struck him down.

Pushing her grim thoughts away, Rosethorn eyed Acornkit from across the camp. The feisty ginger she-kit was play-fighting with Leafkit while Birchpelt looked on warmly. Meanwhile, Rainfoot was watching Crowkit and Flashkit take turns stalking and pouncing on a leaf. The queen occasionally meowed tips to them, helping them correct things they were doing wrong.

"They've never looked more ready to be apprentices," she commented to Nightshade.

"But no cat's more excited than you," the black tom joked.

"I have every right to be!" Rosethorn nudged him playfully. "And you should be, too! We could be mentors before you know it."

"I *am* excited," Nightshade mewed. "I want to be a mentor as much as you do. I just don't know if Adderstar would pick me over every other cat."

"Why wouldn't he? You're a young warrior, and apprentices usually go to those cats. You did really well in your apprenticeship, and you're respected as a warrior."

"You really think so?"

"I know so! There's no reason Adderstar wouldn't let you mentor one of those kits."

Nightshade shrugged. "I guess I'll just take your word for it." He turned his attention back to the playing kits. "Which one would you want as your apprentice?"

"Acornkit, for sure," Rosethorn purred. "She has so much energy, and she's so eager to learn all about being a warrior. Working with her would be fun."

"I've seen Adderstar watching you when you're spending time with Acornkit," Nightshade pointed out. "Maybe he's thinking about you being her mentor."

"I hope so." Rosethorn flicked her ears. "The other kits are great, too, but there's something about Acornkit..."

"She must remind you a lot of yourself when you were a kit."

Rosethorn remembered her conversation with Shadetail at a Gathering. She *had* said that to him; perhaps it was true.

"I think she does," she responded to Nightshade.

"I remember when I was still an apprentice, and I taught you how to stalk prey."

Rosethorn purred. "I was so relieved when I did everything right while training with Pineclaw. And I have you to thank for that."

"Well, you're welcome," Nightshade laughed. "I like to think I didn't do too bad, considering I had wrenched a claw that same day."

"Only another reason why you'd make a great mentor," Rosethorn reminded him.

Nightshade twitched his whiskers, excitement becoming visible in his eyes. *I think he's finally starting to believe that Adderstar could choose him,* Rosethorn thought. *And he'd better! Nightshade deserves it just as much as any other cat.*

She suddenly noticed Adderstar emerge from his den with Beestripe right behind him. The SunClan leader had recovered very well from his battle injuries. There was still a slightly visible scar on his neck, but Dawnfire told her it had healed just fine. Now he was leaping gracefully up to the top of the Cliffrock, while Beestripe sat below it, where the deputy usually sat during Clan meetings.

Rosethorn nudged Nightshade again, nodding towards the Cliffrock. His ears pricked when he saw Adderstar.

"Say goodbye to those lousy apprentice chores for good!" he whispered.

Rosethorn purred with laughter, just as Adderstar yowled the summons. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather

here for a Clan meeting!"

Glancing over at the four kits, Rosethorn realized that Rainfoot and Birchpelt were already grooming their kits hurriedly, so they would look their best at the ceremony. Amusingly, Acornkit growled beneath Birchpelt's grip and tumbled away from him, starting to groom herself. Her littermates stayed still, though they too looked annoyed.

"Let's go," meowed Nightshade, rising to his paws. "I want to sit at the front of the crowd."

Rosethorn followed him, her paws tingling with anticipation. She made eye contact with Quickstorm and Patchflower as she walked. The two were walking side by side with their pelts brushing. She could tell they were excited to see if their daughter would receive an apprentice today.

They did end up sitting at the front of the crowd, only a couple tail-lengths from the shadow the Cliffrock cast. Rosethorn could just barely see Adderstar from her spot. He scanned the clearing to make sure no cats were missing, then cleared his throat.

"Today is a great day for SunClan. Despite the hardships of leaf-bare, and the damage the rogues have done, we have prevailed and are recovering very well. I'd like to celebrate our hard work by naming four kits as apprentices. Let's start with Crowkit."

As the dark gray tabby kit nervously padded towards the base of the Cliffrock, Rosethorn contemplated who would be the best mentor for the stubborn, competitive tom. He would need someone who could keep his attitude in check, and use his spirit to help him train even harder. *Cherryfur would be good. Or maybe Hazelfrost?*

Adderstar jumped from the Cliffrock and landed lightly beside Crowkit, who looked a little daunted by being so close to the SunClan leader.

"From this day on," the tabby tom mewed, "until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Crowpaw." Then he angled his ears toward a cat in the audience. "Cherryfur, you are a very skilled

and experienced warrior. I trust you will train Crowpaw with everything you've learned."

Ha! I guessed it! Rosethorn thought, feeling amusingly triumphant. Beside her, Nightshade commented, "Great choice for Crowpaw."

Cherryfur trotted over to her new apprentice and happily touched noses with him. Crowpaw still looked a bit nervous, but he didn't seem upset about his mentor.

"Leafkit, it's your turn," Adderstar continued. "Come forward."

Rosethorn watched Leafkit strut forward. The little orange-and-white she-kit looked outwardly graceful, but her expression showed how hard she was concentrating on not tripping or stumbling. Rosethorn stifled an amused purr.

When she'd made it to the front of the crowd, Adderstar meowed, "From this moment until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Leafpaw. Your mentor will be Shadowpool."

Rosethorn gasped inwardly. *Shadowpool gets to be a mentor! That's great!* Her friend definitely deserved it.

Then she noticed that, as Shadowpool went to approach Leafpaw, several cats behind her were muttering to one another. She managed to catch one sentence: "Adderstar's really gonna trust him with this after his own sister betrayed us?"

Rosethorn's head snapped in the direction of whoever had said that. Not wanting to interrupt the ceremony, she simply let out a low growl, glaring at whoever looked like they had been speaking.

When she turned back around, Nightshade had an irritated look in his eyes. She could tell he was thinking the same thing as her. *Shadowpool doesn't deserve to be treated like that. He didn't do anything wrong.*

No one else protested as Shadowpool touched noses with Leafpaw, looking as proud as he had the day he became a warrior. The pair walked away to sit beside Crowpaw and Cherryfur. Rosethorn couldn't tell how Leafpaw felt about her mentor; she hoped the

young she-cat wouldn't judge him for things he couldn't control. Besides, both had calm demeanors overall, and would be a great match for each other. *Plus, training Leafpaw would be a perfect way for Shadowpool to prove his loyalty. Not that he needs to, in my opinion!*

"Acornkit, come forward." Rosethorn's heart skipped a beat. *Oh, I really hope Adderstar picks me!*

She watched the feisty ginger she-kit march up to Adderstar, looking undaunted by all the cats watching her. In fact, she looked pleased by all the attention.

"From now on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Acornpaw," Adderstar went on. And, almost like Rosethorn was dreaming, his eyes flicked to her. "Your mentor will be Rosethorn."

While she was trying not to yowl with joy, Nightshade nudged her eagerly. "Congratulations!" he whispered. "Go see Acornpaw."

Rosethorn nodded and padded forward to meet with Acornpaw. As she walked, she heard Adderstar say, "Rosethorn has proven herself a strong and capable warrior many times over. I know she will pass on everything she knows to her new apprentice."

Acornpaw's eyes shone with excitement. When she touched noses with Rosethorn, she mewed, "I'm so glad he chose you!"

"So am I," Rosethorn purred.

She stole a glance up at her leader, and realized he was staring at her, eyes filled with gratitude. When she began to lead Acornpaw away to sit with her siblings and their mentors, he murmured, "I haven't forgotten how you saved my life—well, lives—from that rogue. You will always have my thanks for that."

Practically bursting with pride, Rosethorn dipped her head respectfully as she passed him. She took her place beside Shadowpool and Leafpaw, with Acornpaw sitting up straight beside her.

"And lastly, Flashkit. Come forward." The final kit—who still looked like Leafpaw's twin, as always—trotted forward to stand in front of everyone.

Rosethorn's eyes flicked anxiously between Nightshade and Adderstar. *Flashkit is the last apprentice that will be made for a while. I really hope Adderstar chooses Nightshade to be his mentor!*

"From this moment until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Flashpaw." Adderstar scanned the audience. And eventually his eyes rested on Nightshade. "Your mentor will be Nightshade. He is a calm and capable warrior, and I expect he will pass on every skill he has to you."

Yes! Now we're both mentors! Rosethorn lashed her tail happily, trying to keep her excitement under control. After all, she was the mentor here, not the apprentice!

"That concludes the ceremony," Adderstar yowled. "Welcome, new apprentices: Crowpaw, Leafpaw, Acornpaw, and Flashpaw!"

The cats in the crowd tossed their heads up and began chanting the four cats' names. Rosethorn happily joined in as Nightshade bounded up to her with Flashpaw at his side.

"Yes! We're apprentices!" Acornpaw bounced in circles around Flashpaw, while Crowpaw and Leafpaw trotted up to them. "This is the best day ever!"

"We're gonna be the best warriors any of the Clans have ever seen!" Crowpaw mewed.

"I hope we get to go hunting today," Leafpaw chirped. "Or maybe we'll climb trees!"

"Tree climbing sounds fun!" Flashpaw purred. "But I don't think we'll do that on the first day. Maybe we'll do battle training?"

"Ooh, I hope so." Acornpaw pounced on a dead leaf a few mouse-lengths away. "If one of those dumb rogues comes at us, I want to be ready to drive them off!"

While listening to the siblings' eager chatter, Rosethorn noticed Cherryfur shaking her head fondly. "Why don't you four go see Birchpelt and Rainfoot?" she suggested. "Meet us by the camp entrance when you're done, and we'll all take a tour of the forest together."

"Together?" Leafpaw echoed. "Awesome! Come on, guys, let's go tell our parents!" The patched she-cat charged away to find Rainfoot and Birchpelt. With an indignant squeal, Acornpaw followed her, with Crowpaw and Flashpaw right on her tail.

"Well, I'm going to go talk to Brokenstem," Cherryfur meowed. "I know he'll want to see me now that I've got my own apprentice. Remember, meet the rest of us by the fern tunnel!"

"Okay!" Rosethorn called after her as she trotted away with her tail held high. Turning to Nightshade, she added, "See, what did I tell you? Nothing to worry about!"

"Yeah, I guess you were right," Nightshade purred. "I can hardly believe we actually have apprentices now. It feels like it's been seasons since we were apprentices."

"I agree," Rosethorn chuckled. "But we're not charging off to the elders' den yet!"

"Hey, where'd Shadowpool go?" Nightshade glanced around the camp. Rosethorn began looking around too, and eventually she spotted the smoky tom in deep conversation with Shinefur and Duskheart.

"He's talking with his parents," she mewed. "I wonder if they heard what some of the warriors were saying about him during the ceremony?"

"Speaking of, it was good of you to stand up for him like that," Nightshade replied. "He didn't do anything to be treated the way he is."

"Yeah," Rosethorn agreed. "This is on Minnowtail, not her brother."

"I wonder if Adderstar would have given her an apprentice? You

know, if she hadn't betrayed us?"

"Good question. I'm not sure." Rosethorn saw Dawnfire standing beside Quickstorm and Patchflower. All three were waiting patiently for her. "I should go talk to them. You go find Ebonypelt and Juniperfur."

"Right." Nightshade licked her ear quickly and turned away. "See you at the fern tunnel!"

"See you!" she mewed, feeling warm inside. She made a beeline for her parents and sister.

"I'm so proud of you!" Patchflower purred, circling her daughter. Her bright eyes shone with pride and love.

"You've finally got an apprentice of your own," Quickstorm added. "And StarClan knows you earned this!"

"I know you'll do just fine training Acornpaw," Dawnfire meowed. "She'll be a wonderful warrior!"

Rosethorn was purring so hard she almost couldn't speak. "I'll do my best," she managed.

"You should go meet with the other apprentices and mentors," Dawnfire mewed. "Here, I'll walk with you."

Rosethorn could sense urgency hidden beneath her sister's calm outer appearance. *What does she need to talk to me about?*

"Okay. Cherryfur said we'd meet by the entrance tunnel," she replied aloud. "Let's go."

"Have fun!" Patchflower called after her as she walked away with Dawnfire at her side.

Once their parents were out of earshot, Rosethorn glanced sideways at her sister. "All right, what did you want to tell me?" she prompted.

"Promise me you'll be careful out there."

"Of course I'll be careful. What's got you so spooked, Dawnfire?"

"Nothing, I just...watch out for foxes, or rogues." Dawnfire wouldn't meet Rosethorn's eyes.

"Foxes I can understand, but rogues? We haven't seen or smelled a single trespasser in more than a moon. There's nothing to worry about from them."

"Just because they've disappeared, doesn't mean they're gone for good," Dawnfire retorted. "They could just be...I don't know, taking a break. Or planning something."

"You're worrying too much," Rosethorn comforted her. "Even if a rogue or two decide to show up, we'll have eight cats in the group."

"Only four if you count the ones that can actually fight," Dawnfire retorted.

"Strength in numbers," Rosethorn shot back. She sighed. "Dawnfire, this is more than just your typical worrying about my safety, isn't it? What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," Dawnfire answered stubbornly. "Am I not allowed to be worried about you without it being some big hidden problem to you?"

"Of course you're allowed to. Keep your fur on." Rosethorn touched her sister's ear with her nose. She could tell that Dawnfire wouldn't tell her what was *really* going on, no matter how many times she asked. And asking her again would only agitate her more. "Look, if it makes you feel better, I'll keep an extra-sharp lookout, just for you."

"All right," Dawnfire sighed. She halted, nodding to the cats that were already gathered by the fern tunnel—Cherryfur, Crowpaw, Shadowpool, Leafpaw, and a very eager-looking Acornpaw. "You should go to Acornpaw now."

"Right," Rosethorn meowed. "I'll see you when we get back."

As the sisters walked in opposite directions, Rosethorn pondered

what could really be bothering Dawnfire. *Maybe StarClan told her something? Does she know if the rogues are actually still around?*

If Dawnfire knew something like that, then surely she and Grayleaf would have told Adderstar, so he could warn the Clan. So maybe it wasn't that; maybe the rogues were really gone now.

Would that really be a good thing? a tiny voice inside her suddenly asked.

Rosethorn almost stopped in her tracks. Why wouldn't it be a good thing? It meant that no trespassers were stealing SunClan prey anymore, so there would be less starvation. It was one less enemy to watch out for. Those were all good things!

Then, like a falling tree branch, it hit her. If the rogues were gone, then Rosethorn would never find Pineclaw's murderer. And then her former mentor's death would never be truly avenged. *I couldn't live with that. I* have *to find that fox-hearted coward and slice his throat. Make him pay for all he's done.*

Guilt clawed at Rosethorn like a thorn bush she simply couldn't escape. What kind of warrior was she, to wish that a dire enemy of her own Clan would come back?

But she just couldn't help the way she felt. Pineclaw *had* to be avenged. All she had to do was find the black-and-white tom who had haunted her thoughts and dreams for so long. The moment she'd lay eyes on him, she'd know exactly who he was and what she had to do. It would be over as quickly as it started.

These rapid thoughts left Rosethorn with one question she just didn't feel prepared to answer: *What lengths would I go to in order to get my revenge?*

Chapter 41

"So, what do you think?" Rosethorn stood beside Acornpaw just outside the camp. She knew the forest wasn't as impressive as it was when she became an apprentice herself, since it was leaf-bare, but Acornpaw still looked fascinated.

"It's a lot colder out here than it is back in the camp," the ginger apprentice murmured. "I can still smell cats, but there's a whole *bunch* of other stuff too, now. Oak sap...some weird plants I don't recognize..." The ginger she-cat's nose twitched with confusion. "I can barely smell any prey at all. Where is it?"

"It's leaf-bare now, so most of the prey is hiding from the cold in their dens," Rosethorn explained. "It makes it a little harder to hunt, but we manage."

"You'll manage even better with four extra hunters!" Acornpaw puffed out her chest.

Rosethorn purred. "Wait 'till you actually know how to hunt first!"

"When will we start training?"

"Tomorrow, I should think," Rosethorn answered. Remembering something Pineclaw had said to her, she added, "Learning the territory comes first. We have a lot of ground to cover, after all."

"Okay," Acornpaw mewed eagerly. "Exploring, it is! Can we get going yet? My paws are freezing to the ground! Is it normally this chilly?" She turned in an impatient circle.

Overhearing her, Cherryfur meowed, "It's actually much colder than it's been the past few days. Perhaps we'll be seeing some snow soon."

"Snow?" Rosethorn echoed. "What's that?"

Cherryfur blinked. "Ah. I forgot you haven't seen it before. When it's

snowing, a *ton* of tiny white flakes start to fall from the sky. They cover the whole ground until everything is white."

"You're joking!" Nightshade gasped. "That must be a lot of flakes, if it covers the whole ground."

"You and Shadowpool will stand out like pines among oaks if that ever happens," Rosethorn purred.

"So would you!" Shadowpool retorted good-humoredly. "In fact, I think most of us would stand out easily. It'll be even harder to hunt, then."

"Right," Cherryfur agreed. "I hope it doesn't snow, but at least you'll get to see what it looks like if it does."

"*Please* can we explore now?" Acornpaw groaned. "I can't stay in one place for much longer in this cold!"

"She's right," Rosethorn agreed with a shiver. "We should get moving. Where to first?"

"Let's head for the training clearing," Cherryfur decided. "That way you'll all know how to get there."

"Will we do any training while we're there?" Crowpaw asked.

"Not today. We'll spend the day touring the territory, and tomorrow we'll start training."

"Just like you said," Acornpaw commented to Rosethorn.

The morning dew hadn't evaporated as it normally did; instead the little droplets had created frost on just about every plant the group brushed past. Rosethorn groaned inwardly at the unpleasant feeling of melting frost soaking her pelt.

"Okay, this is the training clearing." Cherryfur stepped aside to let the four apprentices look around. "Unless you're learning something special like tree climbing, most of your lessons will be here. You'll usually do some kind of training every day, but what exactly you're doing depends on your mentor, or what Adderstar wants you to be

learning."

"Cool!" Acornpaw stared up at the bare oak branches above. Half to herself, she muttered, "I wanna climb a tree..."

"It'll be a while before that," Rosethorn reminded her. "This is only your first day."

"Let's head toward the Sun Oak," Shadowpool suggested.

"Good idea," Cherryfur agreed. "You can take the lead if you'd like."

Rosethorn watched as Shadowpool gladly headed the group, with Leafpaw marching beside him with her head high. *Imagining that you're leading a patrol?* she thought with amusement. *I'm glad Cherryfur trusts your mentor enough to let him take the lead. Some cats wouldn't.*

It was a good thing that Cherryfur was a reasonable senior warrior. Maybe she could help the Clan understand that Shadowpool was nothing like his sister.

Leaning closer to Acornpaw, she whispered, "Sniff the air again. What can you smell?"

Acornpaw narrowed her eyes in concentration, her nose twitching madly. "I can still smell a lot of oak sap. And some stale cat scents...this must be a path that patrols usually take, right?"

"That's right," Rosethorn meowed. "Can you tell how old the scents are?"

"Well, the scents are still pretty strong, but they're a little stale..." Acornpaw looked like she was thinking hard to get this right. "Is it two or three days old?"

"Not quite," Rosethorn answered. "These smells seem like they're from yesterday's evening border patrol."

"Right!" Acornpaw gasped. "It was really windy that night. That would have blown some of the scent away and made it stale even faster. Oh, I'm a mouse-brain!"

"Don't worry," Rosethorn chuckled. "I don't expect you to know everything on your first day."

"That won't stop me from trying." Acornpaw bounced a few pawsteps to the right and looked around curiously. "Do you think we'll find any rogues? What do they smell like? Do they look like Clan cats?"

Rosethorn stifled a purr. *She sure asks a lot of questions! At least she's eager to learn, like I knew she'd be.*

In response she mewed, "They look like any cat would if they only groomed themselves once a moon. They smell like a mixture of crowfood and the Twolegplace—you'll learn what that smells like today. And no, I doubt we'll find any rogues today. They've disappeared since the battle."

"Crowfood and the Twolegplace." Acornpaw wrinkled her nose. "Sounds like that would smell worse than FireClan!"

"Well," Rosethorn purred, "you'll learn what they smell like today, too, so you can decide which one is worse!"

"You can all try sniffing for some prey, as practice," Cherryfur called up ahead. "Let us know if you think you smell something. You can watch us hunt as well."

"I bet I'll be the first to smell prey," Crowpaw muttered cheekily to Leafpaw.

"You're on," the patched she-cat purred.

Rosethorn swerved to her left, her pelt briefly brushing Nightshade's. "I'm already having a lot of fun," she mewed. "And we haven't even started training yet!"

"I know," Nightshade replied. "I feel so...proud. And responsible."

"Well, training a new warrior for SunClan is definitely a big responsibility. But I guess it can also be fun."

She wondered wistfully if Pineclaw had felt the same way when he

had been training her. She had been his first apprentice, after all. Had he felt pressured to do his best as a mentor, or had he simply been proud to have been chosen so soon after becoming a warrior?

Rosethorn mentally voted to just be happy that Adderstar had chosen her. She had wanted to be Acornpaw's mentor since before she was even a warrior herself, and now she had just what she wanted. Perhaps, after everything with Pineclaw and the rogues, StarClan was giving her a break from fear and suffering. *I'll be grateful for that.*

"Rosethorn? You still here?" Nightshade was watching her expectantly.

She shook her head rapidly to rid herself of those drifting thoughts. "Yeah, sorry. Just got lost in thought. Did you say something?"

"Nope."

The way Nightshade was staring at her made Rosethorn wonder if he knew she'd been thinking about Pineclaw. He looked rather sympathetic, but also a little sad.

It took a great deal of self-control not to sigh out loud. She knew better than some cats that feelings like love did not just disappear if you wanted them to. Nightshade knew that just as well as she did. *Will there ever be a day when he really doesn't love me anymore?* she asked herself. Then she added, *Will there ever be a day when I'm ready to love someone again?*

And then, one last question: *Why do feelings have to be so complicated?*

"We're almost at the Sun Oak," Cherryfur said in a low voice. "Keep quiet, in case there's some prey foraging around the tree."

Without saying anything to Nightshade, Rosethorn left him and went back to walking alongside Acornpaw. She tried to ignore the feeling of his eyes burning into her from behind, and instead turned her attention to her apprentice.

"Smell anything yet?" she murmured.

"No," Acornpaw whispered back. "But I'm gonna find something soon enough!"

Rosethorn kept her ears pricked, hoping there would be at least one mouse or squirrel nearby. *The Clan could use some extra prey outside of what the hunting patrols bring in. Which isn't much, now.*

"Wait. I smell something." Cherryfur raised her tail for everyone to halt.

"Me too," Shadowpool murmured. "It's squirrels, probably foraging under the Sun Oak."

"I can smell it too!" Acornpaw whispered eagerly. Her littermates, noses twitching, nodded in agreement.

Cherryfur looked over her shoulder. "I'm sure there's more than one. We'll need more than one cat."

"What if we all surrounded the tree in a circle and pounce at the same time?" Shadowpool suggested. "If we're quick, they won't have anywhere to run."

"Not a bad idea," Cherryfur mewed. "Let's do it. Apprentices, you can come closer to watch. Just make sure you keep quiet and stay hidden. Luckily there's no breeze right now, so we won't have to worry about that."

"This is gonna be awesome," Crowpaw purred.

"Good luck!" Flashpaw chirped.

"Rosethorn, Nightshade, you head left," Cherryfur instructed. "Shadowpool and I will head right. Look for my tail sticking up from the bushes; that'll be the signal to pounce."

"Got it." Nightshade nodded, looking excited. "SunClan won't go hungry today!"

Rosethorn let him lead the way into the thicker parts of the undergrowth. She could see the thick, ancient trunk of the Sun Oak standing erect above it all. The scent of squirrel was overwhelming

now. *There's* got *to be more than one!* She carefully positioned herself so that the ferns covered her pelt, but she could still see over them to spot Cherryfur's bright ginger tail.

She found it a little hard to focus, though; she could sense waves of feelings coming off of Nightshade, who was beside her so that their pelts were brushing slightly. It was all too jumbled for her to know exactly what was going through her friend's mind, but she knew well enough that she had something to do with it.

She shook herself—mentally, not wanting to scare off the potential fresh-kill just tail-lengths away. *Keep your mind on the hunt. SunClan's depending on you.*

Narrowing her eyes, she stared at the space just above the ferns on the opposite side of the clearing, watching for the signal. She heard the tiny squeaks of squirrels scrambling to find food, felt their little paws through the ground. Her mouth watered.

Like the spark of a fire, the tip of Cherryfur's tail flicked up above the foliage.

"Go!" Rosethorn hissed. She and Nightshade sprung from the undergrowth in unison.

Instantly she saw three different squirrels, all quite scrawny, but fresh prey all the same. Cherryfur and Shadowpool were already after two; the third one was so startled by them that it didn't see Nightshade and Rosethorn, and skittered straight towards them.

Before she could do anything, Nightshade bolted past her and pounced on the squirrel with blinding speed. Its harsh squeal was cut off when the dark tom sank his teeth into its neck. Shadowpool and Cherryfur caught theirs right after.

"Mouse dung!" Rosethorn exclaimed. "I didn't get to make any catches."

"There'll be more prey along the way, I'm sure," Cherryfur responded. "The tour's a long way from being over."

Suddenly Acornpaw charged into the clearing, her blue eyes bright

with excitement. "That was so fast! One moment there was a bunch of pawsteps, and the next there was...hey, Rosethorn, what's that on your nose?"

As her apprentice spoke, Rosethorn began to feel a chilly sensation on her nose. With a shiver, she lifted a paw and swiped it off. She was surprised to realize it was just water—very cold water. *Is it raining?*

"Just water," she meowed to Acornpaw.

"But it was white," Acornpaw argued. "Water isn't white!"

"Wait, look up at the sky!" Cherryfur gasped. "It's snowing."

Rosethorn glanced up, and her heart skipped a beat in shock. A flurry of tiny white dots were fluttering down from the thick, pale gray clouds above. *Cherryfur was right. There's so many of them!*

"That's so cool!" Flashpaw whispered.

Acornpaw narrowed her eyes as she focused on one of the little white dots. The moment it hit the ground, she shot forward and caught it between her paws with a squeal of triumph. "I caught one! Whoa, it's really cold!"

She moved one of her paws to examine the snowflake. "Wait. Where did it go? I know I caught it!"

"Snow is a lot like ice," Cherryfur explained. "It's made of frozen water. So when it gets too hot, it melts. Your paws are so warm, it melted the snow."

"Nightshade, look at your pelt," Rosethorn purred, laughter in her voice. The solid black tom's fur was already littered with snow.

Nightshade rolled his eyes good-humoredly, and shook himself vigorously. The snowflakes sprayed off of him; Rosethorn let out a *mrrow* of amusement. It reminded her of when Pineclaw got some autumn leaves stuck to his pelt.

"It's too bad none of us have pelts that would blend into this,"

Shadowpool commented. "Like Cherryfur said, hunting will be a little harder now."

"Flashpaw and I could blend in a little bit," Leafpaw mewed. "We only have a few orange spots."

"You also don't know how to hunt just yet," Shadowpool responded. "And we won't have time for a lesson today."

"Speaking of," Rosethorn added, "did you all watch us hunt? What did you notice about the way we caught the squirrels?"

"I noticed something!" Acornpaw declared, puffing out her chest. "You all moved really fast to go after the squirrels, because they're fast too, and harder to catch once they get into the trees."

"Very good!" Rosethorn praised her, pleased that her apprentice was doing well. She saw Cherryfur give her an approving nod, and felt even happier.

"I noticed that, too," Crowpaw muttered under his breath. "Just didn't say anything about it."

"Do we get to learn how to climb trees, too?" Flashpaw asked.

"Not until you're older," Nightshade answered. "Tree climbing is difficult and dangerous. Let's focus on basic hunting and fighting, first."

"Okay," Flashpaw mewed, looking mildly disappointed.

"Okay, let's bury the fresh-kill before the snow covers the whole ground, and continue with the tour," Cherryfur ordered. "The cold ground will keep it fresh until we come back to get it."

The warriors dug shallow hollows into the earth and tossed the squirrels inside. As she scraped more earth over the one Nightshade had caught, Rosethorn thought, *Too bad these will be ice-cold by the time we get to eat them. Prey is always best when it's still warm, especially in leaf-bare!*

"Let's head for the FireClan border," Cherryfur went on. "Then we'll

head to the MoonClan border, and walk along the Twolegplace border. Then we can head back to camp. It'll probably be sundown by then."

The group set off at a steady trot. Acornpaw walked cheerily beside Rosethorn, occasionally batting at snowflakes that fell near her. Rosethorn watched her warmly, happy that this energetic, alert she-cat was her apprentice. *I definitely got lucky!*

With a sudden sense of authority, she lifted her eyes to the sky, hoping StarClan would see and hear her—Pineclaw in particular. *I promise to train Acornpaw to be a talented, loyal warrior that you would be proud of.*

Chapter 42

The vast sheet of white that covered the ground of SunClan's camp still mesmerized Rosethorn. The snow seemed to hold a faint orange glow as it caught the light of the setting sun. She was grateful for the sturdy roof of the warriors' den that sheltered her from the bitter chill.

The four apprentices were talking and playing in the snow just outside of their den. Beestripe was talking with Birchpelt and Rainfoot under the Cliffrock, the only spot the snow hadn't reached. Shadowpool, Shinefur, and Duskheart were sharing tongues beside the meager fresh-kill pile—the squirrels caught earlier that day were already gone. Cherryfur was in deep conversation with Forestfire, Hazelfrost, Ebonypelt, and Juniperfur. The rest of the Clan had already retreated to their nests, not wanting to be in the freezing weather for much longer.

Rosethorn sighed, resting her chin on her paws. It was good to see her Clan relaxed and at ease. They hadn't had a moment to feel safe when the rogues were still prowling around. And, although there was no denying the fierce grip leaf-bare had on the forest now, they were still doing better than they ever were before.

"What are you thinking about?" Dawnfire's question caught Rosethorn by surprise; she hadn't even noticed her sister approaching.

"I'm thinking that we're lucky the rogues left when they did," she answered.

"I don't know if *left* would be the right word to use," Dawnfire muttered. She ducked into the warrior den and settled beside her.

"You think they're still around?" Rosethorn asked.

"I think it doesn't make much sense." Dawnfire shook her paws to rid them of the snow that clogged them. "I mean, they've lived in

that Twolegplace for moons. They didn't do this any other time we fought them. And now...they've just *vanished*. Like all of a sudden, they don't exist anymore. That's weird."

"Maybe killing one of their own made them finally realize who they were up against," Rosethorn remarked ruefully. Her pelt prickled as she recalled the strange taste of Poppy's blood in her mouth.

"I wonder," Dawnfire murmured, "if Minnowtail has something to do with it."

Rosethorn's ears pricked; she hadn't thought of that before. "It wouldn't surprise me. The rogues must be pleased with having a former Clan cat on their side."

"Yeah, it gives them an advantage," Dawnfire growled. "I don't like it. What if she knows something that would...I don't know, give them easy access to the camp, or something?"

"Well, even if she does," Rosethorn replied dryly, "I don't think she knows how to stop SunClan warriors from ripping their pelts on sight." She scoffed. "I'd like to see her try."

The sisters were silent for a while. Then Dawnfire prompted, "So how was your first day as a mentor? How was Acornpaw during the tour?"

"It was great," Rosethorn meowed. "And Acornpaw was great, too. She was always investigating things out of curiosity or fascination. She's really energetic, alert, and eager to learn."

"What does the forest look like all covered in snow? I haven't been out today."

"It's really pretty, like the ground is one giant cloud. But you get soaking wet pretty quickly once the snow melts into your fur."

"I was petrified when I saw the snowflakes coming down," Dawnfire admitted. "I'd heard about snow before, but never expected to see it so quickly. I had no idea what it was!"

"Cherryfur told us to look out for some before we left," Rosethorn

replied. "It started right after we caught those three squirrels."

"Nice catches, by the way." Dawnfire glanced toward the fresh-kill pile. "They may have been small, but they're better than nothing."

"They disappeared pretty quickly." Rosethorn felt a twinge of worry. "Seems we're getting hungrier each day, and leaf-bare is a long way from over."

"Everyone's getting hungrier. It's part of leaf-bare." Dawnfire licked her sister's ear comfortingly. "We may have not gone through it before, but most of SunClan has. It's nothing we can't handle."

"That doesn't stop it from being worrying."

"Let's be grateful that leaf-bare is the only thing we even have to worry about. At least, it is for now." Suddenly Dawnfire stood up. "Well, I'm going to my nest now. Besides, Nightshade looks like he wants to talk to you."

Confused, Rosethorn glanced around and suddenly realized Nightshade was crossing the clearing towards her. Having known him for a long time, she could immediately see the troubled look in his eyes. *What's up with him?*

Dawnfire was already halfway across the clearing when he reached her. He took up the spot she had been in beside Rosethorn, settling contentedly into its warmth.

"What have you been up to?" Rosethorn prompted.

"Just out by myself, trying to catch some prey. And doing a lot of thinking."

"Did you catch anything?"

Nightshade shook his head. "Not even a scent."

"Yikes. Good thing we caught those squirrels earlier."

"Yep."

An awkward silence stretched between the two warriors. Rosethorn continued to wonder what was really bothering her old friend.

"I have to ask you something," he meowed at last.

"What is it?" Rosethorn mewed.

"There's a bit of black-and-white fur under your nest. It doesn't have its own scent, which means it's been there for a while, and there are no black-and-white cats in SunClan. Who does it belong to?"

Rosethorn froze. *How did he see that? Did I forget to put it back under the moss one night?* Sometimes she took out the clump of fur when no other cats were in the den and simply stared at it. It was a strange way to comfort herself when she missed Pineclaw the most, knowing that someday she would end the life of the one who had taken him from her. It was possible that, one night, she'd forgotten to put it back or didn't hide it well enough.

Why hadn't I bothered to tell Nightshade about all this? she asked herself frustratedly. *I told Dawnfire. It's not like I trust him any less than I trust her!*

"I know you heard me," said Nightshade, sounding a little frustrated as well. "Is it from a cat from another Clan?"

"No!" Rosethorn gasped. "Why would you ever think that?"

"I don't know *what* I should think. That fur clump could belong to anyone!"

"Well, you shouldn't think that I'm some kind of traitor like Minnowtail."

The instant the words left her mouth, Rosethorn knew she had gone too far. Nightshade winced, pulling back as if she had just swatted him in the face with her paw.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I know you didn't mean it like that. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Just tell me who the fur belongs to," he sighed.

Rosethorn glanced over her shoulder, aware of all the sleeping warriors inside the den. *It would be a bad idea to mention the rogues in camp, in case anyone else heard me.*

"There's too many cats that could overhear us," she muttered. "Can we talk about this in the morning?"

"Why can't we just talk out in the forest?" Nightshade protested.

"Oh, sure," Rosethorn responded, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "If you're fine with being buried alive by snow and freezing to death."

"Fine," Nightshade growled. "In the morning, then. But I'm holding you to that."

Rosethorn's heart sank as he brushed past her into the den without another word. Soon he would know that the situation was not *as* bad as it was in his head, but that wasn't what worried her. Would Nightshade truly be able to understand her need to track down Pineclaw's murderer?

* * *

Rosethorn could hear her heart pounding in her ears as she ran blindly through the thick undergrowth. Yet another pained screech echoed through the trees, an incoherent plea for someone, *anyone* to help them.

"I'm coming, Pineclaw!" she yowled. "Just hold on!"

Sharp thorns tore the fur off her skin. Vines of ivy snaked around her paws, making her trip and stumble. She didn't care; all she wanted was to find Pineclaw and make sure he was okay. No matter what.

His agonized cries grew louder and more desperate the closer she got. Her heart felt like it was going to burst from her chest in panic. *I don't know if I'm fast enough to make it to him!*

The scent of Pineclaw's blood hit Rosethorn like a monster on the Thunderpath, just as he let out another yowl. Trembling with fear

and adrenaline, she shoved her way through one last layer of undergrowth and stumbled, exhausted, into the tiny clearing.

Her eyes instantly met Pineclaw's—his were blank and sightless, his mouth hanging open. His pelt was shredded, clumps of it surrounding his body; his blood stained the earth around him; his legs were twisted in unnatural, disturbing ways, sticking up in the air but limp at the same time.

Rosethorn felt bile rising into her throat at the sight of him like this. *No, no, no...I could've been faster...I could have* saved *him.*

"Yeah, you could have. And you didn't."

Almost completely expecting it, Rosethorn turned around to look at the little black-and-white tom who had spoken. Just making her way here had sapped all her energy, but the sight of this cat made her blood boil all over again.

"Instead," he went on scathingly, amber eyes glinting with mockery, "you let two rogues sneak onto your territory, and one of them killed Pineclaw. You loved him, and yet you let him die. They tell you it's not your fault, but they all know they're lying. It's *all* your fault, Rosethorn. And no one will *ever* forgive you for that."

There's no way he could know my name, or Pineclaw's, Rosethorn thought in the back of her mind. *Or that I loved him...*

Suddenly the forest began to wither around her. The bare oak branches crumbled to the ground as ash, and the sparse undergrowth wilted into dust. The ground shook violently beneath Rosethorn's paws, and she lost her balance. Her head hit the ground hard, and she was thrust into darkness.

"Hey, Rosethorn."

She opened her eyes with a gasp, and sat up in her nest, panting. Looking up, she realized Nightshade was staring at her worriedly.

"Another bad dream?" he asked sympathetically.

"Nothing but that," Rosethorn sighed. In any other circumstance she

would have told him about the nightmare, but that was the last thing she wanted to do now. "What's up?"

"Beestripe said it was okay for the two of us to do the dawn border patrol. The snow probably washed away most of the scent marks, so we'd better hurry and redo them."

"All right, let's go, then." Rosethorn smoothed her ruffled pelt with a few hasty licks, and followed Nightshade out of the warriors' den. Her tightened chest slowly loosened itself as the nightmare faded into the back of her mind.

Out in the forest there was still a bit of snow on the ground, but most of it had melted and joined the morning dew in soaking every bit of foliage. Rosethorn groaned inwardly when she brushed past a holly bush and immediately soaked her pelt.

"This is horrible," she grunted to Nightshade. "It's like there was a rainstorm during the night!"

"Well, I suppose you can distract yourself from it by explaining what's going on."

Nightshade didn't glance back at her. She winced at his abrupt tone, and knew he was still upset that she hadn't told him anything for moons.

"All right," she sighed, "but it's going to sound crazy."

"I've heard crazy from you before."

Rosethorn chose to ignore that wry comment. "I know who killed Pineclaw."

Nightshade froze, one of his paws still in the air. After a moment he kept walking, but slower, and with his ears pricked attentively. "It was a rogue, right?"

"Yes, but I know exactly which one," Rosethorn replied. "He's small, with black-and-white fur and big, round amber eyes."

"The fur clump was black and white..." Nightshade murmured, half

to himself. Louder he mewed, "That's awfully specific. Have you seen the cat before? I thought he fled after Thrushtail killed the other rogue."

"I have seen him. Well, not in *person*, so to speak..." Rosethorn braced herself to be called insane by her best friend. "I've seen him in my dreams."

"What on earth are you talking about? In your *dreams*?" Nightshade turned his head to look at her skeptically. "How would you even know this cat actually exists? I know the fur clump is black and white, but any cat could have fur like that."

"Do you remember our silent vigil after we became warriors?" Rosethorn prompted. "We were sitting outside the camp, and I walked away for a while."

"I remember. You went towards Pineclaw's grave, right?"

"Yeah. When I got there, that little piece of fur was nearby. With rogue stench all over it."

"Seriously?" Nightshade gasped. "Why didn't you report it to Adderstar?"

"There weren't any other signs that a rogue had been near the grave," Rosethorn admitted.

"Okay. So no rogues had been nearby." She could tell Nightshade was thinking hard—and out loud, as usual—so she waited patiently for him to finish. "Then how did it get there? Did some cat pull it off Pineclaw's paw? No, then they would have told Adderstar because it smelled of the rogues...so, what? It just appeared out of thin air?"

"Think about it," Rosethorn meowed. "I've been having dreams about this strange black-and-white cat—ever since I was an apprentice, by the way. Then Pineclaw is murdered, and a piece of fur the same color as that cat shows up near his grave. There's no obvious explanation for *how* it got there, but it smells strongly like a rogue. And Pineclaw was killed by a rogue."

Nightshade was silent for a long time. Then he sighed, "You think StarClan is trying to tell you exactly who killed Pineclaw."

"Exactly."

"This is crazy."

"I warned you from the start."

"I know."

Rosethorn quickened her pace to match Nightshade's, walking beside him and silently waiting for him to say something more.

"If this is actually true—and that's a *big* 'if,'" he said eventually, "how would we even find this cat? There's dozens of rogues, and they all live in a place we aren't familiar with at all. Plus, for all we know, they could already be gone by now. We haven't found a trace of them nearby in days."

"I don't know," Rosethorn sighed. "All I know is that StarClan wouldn't have revealed all of this to me for no reason. They must want me to find the rogue and make sure he pays for what he's done to SunClan. It *can't* be too late now."

"Well, either way, don't do anything rash by yourself," Nightshade warned. "That could only end badly. You'll just have to wait until we have warriors to spare, and then we can figure out what happened to the rogues. And maybe we'll find this specific cat, too."

Rosethorn reluctantly murmured her agreement. Inside she was wondering if revenge had the patience to wait that long.

Chapter 43

"That was pretty good, but your timing was a little off. I almost dodged it." Rosethorn got back up on her paws as she spoke. It was now just after sunhigh—she and Nightshade finished their border patrol not long ago, with no problems—and she was in the middle of a training session with Acornpaw.

Right now they were practicing an attack that gave smaller, speedier cats like her apprentice an advantage: using your speed to confuse the opponent, and charging at them when they least expect it. *I had a lot of fun when Pineclaw was teaching me that move.*

Acornpaw shook herself, huffing with frustration. "I can't be much faster with all this frost and snow making me slip!" she complained. "I can't keep any balance or traction."

Rosethorn blinked at her sympathetically. "I know. But practice makes perfect. We'll just keep trying it out, and you'll get better with time."

"Okay. I'm ready." Acornpaw determinedly got back into her starting position. Quieter, and probably to herself, she muttered, "I thought the snow was pretty at first, but I was wrong. It's nothing but a nuisance."

Rosethorn crouched down too, fixing her gaze on her apprentice's paws as she waited for her to move. She stifled a shiver as icy water from the melting snow seeped through her fur, and felt inclined to agree with Acornpaw. The snow was starting to get annoying!

Acornpaw suddenly darted at her with a yowl, feigning viciousness. Rosethorn's quick reflexes let her leap out of the way, but her apprentice managed to catch her tail between her paws.

She felt a sharp pain in her hindquarters as she was halted and tugged backwards. Acornpaw sunk her claws into the very tip—delicately, not trying to really hurt her—and yanked it to one side.

Rosethorn stumbled, put off balance, and struggled to regain her steady footing. With another yowl, sounding more triumphant, Acornpaw ducked and charged between her legs, completely sweeping her off of her paws. She hit the ground with a loud *thump*, the breath driven out of her.

"Wow! Did I do okay?" Acornpaw trotted in a circle, her tail lashing eagerly. "I think I did pretty...Rosethorn, are you all right?"

Rosethorn coughed, waving a paw in the air in a dismissive fashion. *Just give me a minute to breathe. That was very good!*

"I might've been a bit too rough," Acornpaw mewed worriedly. "I was super excited. Sorry if I hurt you too badly!"

"Don't...apologize," Rosethorn rasped. "You did really well. If you pulled that...on an enemy warrior, chances are they'd be winded for as long as I was."

"Which is a good thing, right?"

"A very good thing."

Acornpaw purred. She crept up to Rosethorn and nudged her flank as she staggered to her paws, trying to help her stand. *Am I getting old? Please don't tell me I'm getting old...*

"That was a smart idea, to pull my tail to get me off balance," Rosethorn commented. "How did you know to do that?"

"I remembered watching you do it when you were fighting that fox." Acornpaw glanced mischievously at her paws. "The one that tried to get me and my littermates when we snuck out of camp."

Rosethorn's eyes widened. "You remembered that? It happened moons ago; I'd think you wouldn't have remembered anything when you were that young."

"Well, that whole ordeal kind of stuck with me," Acornpaw admitted. "I remember how vicious Hazelfrost was when she was guarding us from the fox. I remember Pineclaw and Juniperfur shouting out orders to help you defeat it." She paused for a moment,

her eyes misty with faint memories. "I hadn't realized how hard everyone would have fought to find us and keep us safe. I knew at that moment that, when I grew up, I wanted to be exactly like that."

Rosethorn blinked warmly at her ginger apprentice. "Protecting kits is in the warrior code," she meowed. "Any good warrior would have fought just as hard as we did. If you stick to the code, then that's all you would need to do to be like that."

"I also remember...well, it's not much, but...I remember Pineclaw being mad at you, too. You did something to make him angry, but I don't know what."

Rosethorn stubbornly fought the painful thorns of grief that dug into her heart at the sound of Pineclaw's name. "He...he wasn't angry with me," she responded. "He was disappointed. A little worse than him being angry."

"What happened?" Acornpaw asked curiously.

"I disobeyed him," Rosethorn answered simply. "I was still only an apprentice, and I was supposed to listen to my mentor regardless of how I felt about the matter. I didn't."

She was certain Acornpaw could sense how hesitant she was to talk about what happened that day. But the dark ginger she-cat asked one more question: "Did you ever regret disobeying him?"

Rosethorn pondered that for a moment or two. *Did* she regret standing up to that FireClan patrol against Pineclaw's orders? Her actions hadn't changed anything; it had only gotten her in more trouble than she had already been in for being the main reason the kits snuck out of camp in the first place. There was no reason to be proud of it...right?

She shook her head firmly. "No, I don't regret it. It may have only gotten me in extra trouble, but I didn't really care. I had shown the Clan—or at least, the cats that were on the patrol—that I wouldn't stay silent. I knew exactly what was right and what was wrong, and I wasn't afraid to make that clear to everyone around me. I guess...I guess that day kind of helped shape me into the cat I am today."

Acornpaw murmured to herself, likely taking Rosethorn's words to heart. She felt proud that her apprentice wanted to follow her example.

After a while the orange apprentice looked up at her, seeming slightly guilty. "By the way, sorry that I told everyone about the tunnel that you and Nightshade had been using. I didn't know what else to say, and I was afraid they would know I was hiding something and get mad at me."

"Don't worry about it," Rosethorn chuckled. "You told the truth. I can't be mad at you for that. Besides, I think I deserved it. I should have been more careful with sneaking out through that tunnel—actually, I shouldn't have been sneaking out at all."

"Nightshade was with you, too," Acornpaw added. "Why didn't he get in any trouble?"

"I told Adderstar he didn't have anything to do with it," Rosethorn confessed. She supposed it would do no harm to tell the truth now, when it happened so many moons ago. "I said his scent was there by accident, and that I was the one who had been sneaking out."

"Why did you do that?"

"He didn't have any real reason to be in trouble. He was just following me." Her heart ached as she said that. *He would always follow me. He was always right there.* She forced the feelings down, concluding, "But I needed to be taught a lesson. I knew that."

Rosethorn sighed briskly. "Okay, that's enough of all this. Back to training."

"All right." Acornpaw looked as if she had more questions to ask, but she held her tongue. "So what's next?"

* * *

After they'd finished up at the training clearing, Rosethorn led the way back to camp on aching legs. Acornpaw was certainly a feisty fighter, and took her training very seriously. She was going to grow into a warrior that no cat would want to mess with in battle.

She caught the scent of a group of cats up ahead—Patchflower, Robinfeather, Thumpstep, and Harefoot—and raised her tail for Acornpaw to halt. Moments later the undergrowth rustled madly, and the four cats emerged. Strangely they all looked rather worried.

"Something wrong?" Rosethorn prompted her mother, since she was standing at the head of the patrol.

"Ashwhisker came out of the elders' den calling for help just a moment ago," Patchflower explained. "Brokenstem had woken up from a nap and had a coughing fit right after. Some warriors had to carry him to the medicine den."

"Oh, no!" Acornpaw whispered. "It's not greencough, is it?"

"Is Brokenstem doing any better now?" Rosethorn asked worriedly.

"I don't know," Patchflower answered. "Beestripe asked me to lead a hunting patrol so we'll have a good amount of fresh-kill in case there's a disease outbreak. We didn't have the chance to check on him. But I'm sure Grayleaf and Dawnfire are taking good care of him."

"Yeah," Rosethorn agreed. "I'll go see how he's doing as soon as we get back to camp."

"Good. And by the way, the Gathering is tomorrow night, so make sure to get some rest. You'll be going with Acornpaw to introduce her to the other Clans."

"That's *tomorrow*?" Acornpaw gasped, her tail shooting up. "I totally forgot! It's going to be so fun!"

"I'd forgotten, too," Rosethorn chuckled. "I guess tomorrow is a pretty big day!"

"Can I go tell my siblings?" Acornpaw trotted in a circle like she always did when she was pleased or excited. "They might not have remembered the Gathering either, and they should have plenty of energy for it!"

"You can tell them, *after* you go see to the elders," Rosethorn

responded with a fond briskness to her tone. "If cats are starting to fall ill, then it's best for them to be in top condition so they're less likely to get sick. Change out the moss in their nests, check for ticks, and make sure they're well-fed."

"Oh. Of course, I'll get right on it." Acornpaw dipped her head, then immediately charged off towards the camp.

Thumpstep snorted with laughter. "She seems eager for everything. Even chores that most apprentices hate."

"Well," Rosethorn reasoned, "she did spend a lot of time with the elders as a kit. It makes sense she'd be eager to help them if they've started to get sick."

Patchflower mewed her agreement. She added, "We'd better be on our way now. See you in the evening."

Rosethorn dipped her head in farewell to the patrol, then set off on her way back to camp.

A sharp anxiety gnawed at her belly. They weren't even halfway through leaf-bare, and SunClan already had cases of sickness. Whether it was whitecough or greencough didn't matter in the long run; both were just as bad when the weather was frigid and prey was pitifully scarce. *I wonder if the other Clans are getting sick too?* she pondered. *Perhaps we'll find out at the Gathering.*

She was half-expecting the Clan to have a quiet and anxious air, and she wasn't wrong.

Groups of warriors huddled for warmth or to talk all around the clearing. Acornpaw was gingerly taking a long stick with some moss on it into the elders' den—mouse bile, Rosethorn guessed, fresh from Grayleaf's den. Her brothers, Crowpaw and Flashpaw, were sifting through the meager fresh-kill pile, their eyes dull with disappointment and tails lashing with frustration. Leafpaw sat nearby with Shadowpool, talking comfortably but casting hungry glances at the prey pile. Adderstar and Beestripe sat in the entrance to the former's den, staring grimly at the medicine den.

Even before Brokenstem started coughing, we were all suffering. Rosethorn gazed at her Clan with a fraught concern. *And I know this isn't the worst of it. How much longer can we go on like this?*

Steadying herself with two deep breaths, Rosethorn fluffed out her pelt and trotted across the camp to Grayleaf's den, hoping to check on Brokenstem. Inside it was rather warm; she relished the feeling on her chilled fur until she realized that most of the warmth was indeed radiating from Brokenstem.

The old tabby tom was dozing in one of the nests Grayleaf and Dawnfire set up for their patients. He was breathing steadily—although Rosethorn could hear an unhealthy rasp in each exhale—and his crooked tail twitched every once in a while.

Dawnfire poked her head out of the small gap in the brambles that she and Grayleaf made their own nests in. "Hi, Rosethorn," she mewed in a low voice, so as not to disturb Brokenstem. "Are you alright? You're not coughing too, are you?"

Rosethorn shook her head reassuringly. "I'm fine. No coughs."

Dawnfire glanced at Brokenstem, then back at her. "Even so, stay a good distance away from him. We're pretty sure he has whitecough, and it's *very* contagious."

"You're going near him all the time," Rosethorn commented.

"Well, I'm a medicine cat," her sister retorted. "It's my job to be near sick cats. Anyway, did you need something?"

"I just wanted to know how Brokenstem was doing. You said he *might* have whitecough?"

"He's showing most of the signs. Coughing, raspy breath, and, as I'm sure you've noticed, fever. He's been in and out of consciousness, so we're giving him herbs whenever we can. I think he'll be okay, at least for now."

"That's good. And Acornpaw is making sure Fernstripe and Ashwhisker are healthy too."

"Yeah, she came in a moment ago to get some mouse bile—and she wanted to talk to Brokenstem, too, but he was still asleep. And I had to remind her to keep her distance."

She probably wanted to keep him company once she was done with her chores, Rosethorn assumed, feeling a flash of pride in her empathetic apprentice.

"By the way, I'm not coming to the Gathering tomorrow night," Dawnfire added. "I'm staying behind to make sure Brokenstem doesn't get any worse."

"That's too bad," Rosethorn meowed. "But it makes sense."

"Make sure to tell me how Acornpaw reacts to Adderstar announcing her apprenticeship!"

"Oh, I bet she'll soak up the attention like moss soaking up water," Rosethorn purred. "Well, I'll see you later."

"Yeah. And you better come see me if you think you're even a *little* sick. Okay?" Dawnfire stared sternly at Rosethorn. "Don't let your pride turn you away."

Rosethorn rolled her eyes at her overprotective sister. "I won't. I promise." She dipped her head, spun around, and walked out of the den.

Chapter 44

After Rosethorn left the den, Dawnfire didn't feel like she could relax. Before her sister had visited, she had been in her nest, talking with Grayleaf. Now her mentor was asleep, like Brokenstem, so she assumed the elderly medicine cat didn't have any tasks for her. Still, Dawnfire felt restless and wanted to do something helpful. After smoothing her pelt that had been ruffled from her nest, she left the medicine den.

Checking over the Clan—at least, the cats who weren't already out hunting or patrolling—seemed like a good idea. Dawnfire stopped by the fresh-kill pile, where Crowpaw and Flashpaw were sharing a tiny, scrawny squirrel. She felt a flash of sympathy for the brothers; it was terrible that two cats so young had to experience what true hunger was. And it wouldn't be long before that hunger turned into starvation.

"Hello, you two," she meowed as she halted in front of them.

Flashpaw and Crowpaw looked up, blue and amber eyes watching her curiously.

"Hi, Dawnfire," Flashpaw greeted her. "Did you need us to do something?"

"Just checking over you to make sure you're not sick," Dawnfire responded. "Have either of you been coughing at all, or had any tightness in your chest?"

"Flashpaw was coughing earlier, but I think it was because he started eating the squirrel way too fast." Crowpaw nudged his littermate teasingly.

Flashpaw rolled his eyes. Glancing back at Dawnfire, he mewed, "Other than that, we haven't had either of those."

"Good. How about fever? Have you felt much warmer than you

usually do, to the point where it's uncomfortable?"

"Nope," Crowpaw chirped. "I think we're healthy."

"Warmth does sound great right about now," Flashpaw muttered.

Dawnfire twitched her ear, silently agreeing with the orange-and-white tom. "Okay, I'd say you two are healthy. But remember those symptoms, and come straight to me or Grayleaf if you have them or if you see another cat that has them. And tell your sisters so you can make sure they're healthy, too."

"We promise!" Crowpaw and Flashpaw meowed in unison.

"Thanks," Dawnfire purred. She nodded a quick farewell to the apprentices and moved on to another group of cats: Cherryfur, Rainfoot, Birchpelt, and Quickstorm. The warriors were deep in a clearly interesting conversation that ceased as she approached.

Cherryfur stared at her, green eyes dark with concern. "How's Brokenstem?" she asked. "Is he awake yet?"

Dawnfire remembered with a touch of sympathy that Brokenstem had been Cherryfur's mentor when she was an apprentice. *She must have been dying to hear how he was doing.*

"He's not awake yet," she answered, "but his breathing is steady now. We're not sure when he'll wake up, but I'll let you know when he does."

Cherryfur sighed with relief. "Thank you, Dawnfire," she murmured.

"If you're wondering whether we're sick," Quickstorm meowed, "you don't need to worry about us right now. We haven't been coughing or feverish."

"I'm a medicine cat," Dawnfire reminded her father. "It's my job to worry."

The apprentices had been one thing for her; senior warriors were another. For one: the apprentices were strong and growing fast, so they already had a lower risk of getting sick. Older cats ran a higher

risk. Two: young cats tended to be pretty bad liars, especially when it came to being ill. Senior warriors often let their pride get the best of them and refused help even when they needed it.

Her mind made up, Dawnfire instructed, "Lift your head up so I can see your chest, and hold still."

Quickstorm obeyed with an indignant grunt. Dawnfire placed her paw on his chest. "Now take a deep breath. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth."

Her father breathed in slowly. Focusing, Dawnfire felt the movements of his chest through her paw. There was no tightness, no sign of his lungs struggling to work smoothly. When he exhaled, there was no rasp in his breath. *And he doesn't feel too warm, either. He seems healthy.*

"All right, you're all clear," she meowed. "I'll test the rest of you to make sure you are, too."

As she ran the test on the three other warriors, Dawnfire began to feel a little more hopeful that the diseases that leaf-bare brought would not be so bad this season. As long as she and Grayleaf were attentive and aware of how their Clanmates were doing—as they always were—then SunClan would stay relatively healthy.

Perhaps StarClan is giving us a break from all the troubles we've already faced.

* * *

"Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Yes, Grayleaf. This isn't the first time I've tended to the Clan on my own." Dawnfire twitched her whiskers with a fond exasperation. It was the night of the Gathering, and she was trying to convince Grayleaf not to stay behind with her.

"But not for an entire night," her mentor argued. "And if anything serious happens, I'll be too far away to come help you."

"If anything serious happens, I know enough to handle it on my

own," Dawnfire retorted. "Honestly, Grayleaf, I'll be *fine*. Besides, what if the other medicine cats have something important to say? You can't miss out on that, right?"

"I suppose..." Grayleaf growled reluctantly. "Oh, fine. But you'd better remember to check up frequently on Brokenstem. And make sure none of the cats staying behind—"

"Make sure they aren't showing any symptoms of whitecough or greencough," Dawnfire finished impatiently. "I know what to do, I promise. Now hurry up and join the Gathering patrol before they leave without you!"

"Okay, okay, I'm going," Grayleaf grunted. "I'll see you in the morning."

"See you." Dawnfire returned to the medicine den after her mentor hobbled toward the fern tunnel. *I don't know what's got her so worried. I've been training for moons now!*

"Grayleaf seems worried you can't handle one night on your own," Brokenstem commented as she padded past his nest. The sick elder had woken up not long ago, wanting to wish the other elders a safe night since he couldn't go with them to the Gathering. It seemed he hadn't gone back to napping.

"You heard all that?" Dawnfire asked, mildly surprised.

"I may be old, but my ears still work just fine. Unlike Ashwhisker's, that deaf furball."

Dawnfire purred, with both laughter and satisfaction. If Brokenstem was well enough to make jokes, then it seemed he was recovering just fine. *Maybe one more dose of tansy—and a bit of catmint—and he'll be free of whitecough.*

"Yeah," she meowed, continuing the conversation, "I'm not sure why Grayleaf is acting so stressed about it. I've tended to the Clan by myself before; and it's only one night, anyway!"

"Well, I don't doubt your skills," Brokenstem purred. "I know I'm in good paws."

Dawnfire's tail curled contently, and she gave the old tabby tom a warm glance. Praise from an elder was praise, indeed!

Trotting buoyantly to the herb stock, she asked, "Would you like poppy seeds with your herbs?"

"Not at the moment," Brokenstem replied. "I was thinking of eating a bit before I went back to sleep. Maybe some after I'm done eating, if that's all right?"

"Sure," Dawnfire mewed. *An appetite is another great sign that he's recovering.* "I'll just give you some tansy and catmint, and you'll be good to go eat. Or did you want me to bring you something?"

"No, I'll get it myself. Some fresh air will do me good anyway."

"That it will."

After he ate the catmint and tansy, Dawnfire watched Brokenstem pad stiffly out of the den. *Hmm...the cold has probably been hard on his joints.* She recalled a trick Grayleaf had taught her; that lining the cat's nest with comfrey leaves would help with stiff joints, and decided she would do that while he was gone.

"Dawnfire? Can I come in?"

She recognized the voice as Shadowpool's. He hadn't been chosen to go to the Gathering. "Yes, come on in."

The dark gray tom's amber eyes immediately showed how anxious he was as he walked in.

"What's wrong?" Dawnfire prompted.

"I think I might be getting si—" Shadowpool's answer was interrupted by a bout of coughing. "—sick."

Dawnfire narrowed her eyes. "Well, it's a good thing you didn't go to the Gathering," she muttered. Louder she added, "You can lay in the nest beside Brokenstem's. I'll be back in a moment with some herbs for you."

"Thanks." While Shadowpool settled himself into the nest, Dawnfire went over to the herb stock. She noticed they still had quite a bit of catmint, but were running considerably low on tansy. *And it only grows in greenleaf, so we won't find any more flowers for several moons. I can't use it all up now.*

She felt a little bad about using up precious catmint when it wasn't greencough she was treating, but it was better than giving Shadowpool's cough a chance to develop into something more serious. After taking a few smaller leaves of the delicious-smelling plant, she returned to Shadowpool.

"It's catmint," she mumbled through the leaves in her mouth. "It'll cure your cough in no time."

"The one herb that actually tastes great," Shadowpool rasped, whiskers twitching. "Thanks, Dawnfire."

Dawnfire set the leaves down in front of him. "Once you're done eating them, I'll need to run a couple quick tests. Just a precaution."

"Sure." Shadowpool ate the leaves slowly, obviously savoring the taste for a few heartbeats. Dawnfire stifled an amused purr.

"All right, just hold your head up so I can see your chest," she ordered. She would run the same test she had on the senior warriors yesterday to find out how bad Shadowpool's cough was.

The dark warrior did as she asked, and she put her paw on his chest. Immediately she noticed it seemed rather tight, and she could both hear and feel light rasps in every breath he took. *Well, it's definitely some kind of chest infection. But how serious is it?*

"Take a deep breath in through your nose, and out with your mouth," Dawnfire instructed. "That way I can feel how serious the cough is by the way you breathe."

"'Kay." After a couple extra coughs, Shadowpool inhaled deeply. Dawnfire was relieved to find that the infection wasn't as bad as it could have been. He would need to stay in the medicine den for a day or two until he was cured, to prevent the cough from spreading,

but he wouldn't need too much treatment.

She backed quickly away as Shadowpool tried to let out the breath he'd taken, and it ended in a sudden coughing fit. *I'm not about to catch whitecough myself!*

"Sorry," Shadowpool spluttered. "I hope I didn't get you sick, or anything!"

"No, you're fine," Dawnfire reassured him. "You have whitecough, but it's a milder case. A day or two of treatment should get rid of it."

"I'll have to stop my warrior duties until I'm healthy, right?"

"Yep. Unless you want to risk getting your Clanmates sick."

"Which I don't."

"Great."

"I think that catmint is already starting to work." Shadowpool shifted in the nest. "I don't feel like I have to hold back any coughs!"

"That's good," Dawnfire purred. "Just let me know when that feeling does come back, and I'll give you your next dose of catmint. For now this will be where you sleep, so you can just ask me or Grayleaf, when she gets back from the Gathering."

"Oh, yeah..." Shadowpool glanced down at his paws. "Speaking of the Gathering, I had something to ask you."

Dawnfire pricked her ears with interest. "What is it?"

"Does Adderstar think I'll end up like my sister?"

Dumbfounded, Dawnfire stared at him. "Like your sister? What makes you think he thinks that?"

"I could see it in the way he looked at me when I asked to go to the Gathering," Shadowpool murmured. "I could see it in the eyes of almost every cat within earshot. I've...I've told *so many* cats that I

had nothing to do with my sister betraying SunClan, but I don't think they believe me. Maybe they never will."

"I believe you," Dawnfire responded gently. "I know Rosethorn does. And Nightshade, and Grayleaf. None of the elders think you're a traitor, either."

"But Adderstar does," Shadowpool growled despairingly. "How am I supposed to prove my loyalty if my own leader doesn't even trust me?"

"You don't know for sure that he doesn't trust you," Dawnfire reasoned. "He may have told you no just to appease his warriors. Or maybe he just didn't pick you this time. Not every warrior gets to go to every Gathering, regardless of who they are."

"You might be right. But that's not the only thing about all this that bothers me." Shadowpool flattened his ears. "I can't stop thinking about everything Minnowtail said to us. Her reasons for leaving SunClan. She kept saying that no one appreciated the things she did, that Shinefur and Duskheart were always ignoring her to spend time with me. She stayed quiet about *all* of that until that day; I had no idea how she really felt."

"Shadowpool..."

"I know what you're going to say, I do. That Minnowtail's betrayal wasn't my fault, that she made her own choice, and nothing I could have done would've changed that. But...you're wrong. It *was* my fault—at least partly." Shadowpool shook his head, unable to meet Dawnfire's eyes. "I was her *brother,* for StarClan's sake! Out of all the cats in the entire Clan, I was the one who should have noticed how she felt. Maybe through some kind of jealous look, or a strange tone to the things she said...but I didn't.

"The whole time I was so unaware, thinking that everything was all right, that I couldn't see the problem that was growing bigger by the day, right in front of me. If I had paid just a *little* more attention, maybe I could have stopped her from doing what she did. Maybe the thought of leaving never would've crossed her mind in the first place."

Dawnfire was quiet for several heartbeats as she planned out her response. Somehow she had to reassure Shadowpool that he wasn't responsible for everything Minnowtail had done.

"I don't know how bad this really hurts you, to think that most of your Clan doesn't trust you. But I *do* know that, no matter what, you were not responsible for any cat's choices. It doesn't matter that you were Minnowtail's sister; you still didn't force her to make any decisions. If she was feeling neglected or misunderstood, she should have said something. And she didn't, but that's not your fault! Minnowtail is the *only* one to blame for what she did. And any cat who doesn't trust you because of her is a mouse-brain."

Shadowpool sighed heavily. He said nothing for a long time, staring down at his paws. Dawnfire was about to speak again, but suddenly he perked up; his ears pricked, eyes narrowed, nose twitched.

"What's that awful smell?" he growled.

Just as he spoke, an panicked yowl split the air, and Dawnfire's heart skipped several beats. There were no words, just an ear-splitting wail.

"Stay here!" Dawnfire hissed to Shadowpool. "I'll find out what's going on!"

"Careful!" He growled back, following her to the entrance of the medicine den.

As soon as Dawnfire walked outside, the scent hit her like a monster on a Thunderpath—and it smelled just as bad as one. The fur on her neck rose with an eerie sense of recognition. *I know that smell.* She glanced up at the night sky, and wasn't surprised to find it rapidly growing clouded with smoke.

Beestripe bolted up to her, his fur so bushed out he looked twice his size. His golden eyes were so wide she could see the whites at the rims.

"The forest is on fire!" he hissed. "Evacuate the camp. Adderstar will lead us away once every cat is accounted for."

"Oh, StarClan...okay, I'll get Shadowpool." Dawnfire watched in shock as the deputy whirled around and raced in another direction to warn more cats. *A fire...I* knew *I recognized that scent. From my dreams...*

All of a sudden, terrifyingly vivid memories flashed through her mind. A wall of fire consuming her and the forest; the ruined camp and the scorched bodies of her Clanmates; her mutilated face staring blankly back at her. *That was my first dream about Sunstar's prophecy!*

And in that moment, Dawnfire had never been so scared in her life.

StarClan help us. The prophecy is coming true...

Chapter 45

"Stay beside me, Acornpaw," Rosethorn meowed, not for the first time since the patrol had departed. "You can wander around once we get to the Gathering."

"Right. Sorry." Acornpaw veered back towards her, amber eyes shining in the darkness of the night as she looked around. "I'm just so excited! How many cats will be there? How big is the Moontree? Does it really glow like Fernstripe says it does?"

"Acornpaw, be patient and behave," Rainfoot scolded. She was padding alongside Rosethorn to keep an eye on her mischievous daughter. Now her eyes were narrowed sternly, though Rosethorn could see a hint of fondness in her expression. "No part of the Gathering is going anywhere anytime soon. You'll see everything once we get there."

"I don't mind answering all her questions," Rosethorn chuckled. "There will be a lot of cats there; each Clan brings a group about as big as our own. You can mingle with the other Clans, as long as you're respectful—and try not to get lost among all of the cats! As for the Moontree, it's *very* big."

"As big as the Sun Oak?" Acornpaw gasped.

"Not quite as tall, but definitely just as wide," Rosethorn answered.

"What about the glowing leaves? Is it true that they glow as bright as the full moon?"

"They do, but not on their own. They catch the light of the moon and Silverpelt and reflect it. It's beautiful—especially in leaf-bare, when most trees have no leaves. The Moontree is evergreen."

"Wow." Acornpaw's eyes seemed to glow with the moon's light, too. "I can't *wait* to see it!"

"I'm not really that interested in some giant tree," commented Crowpaw, who had caught up to them and overheard the conversation. "I'm excited to meet the cats from other Clans. I wonder if their apprentices train differently than we do?"

"Good question," his mentor Cherryfur meowed. "You know no Clan is the same—we all have differing territories, cultures, and skills passed on by our ancestors. And you'll notice that even the cats themselves look different; their posture, the length of their fur, what color it is, things like that. It's all because of how those cats' ancestors grew up, and how they grew up.

"Each Clan has something that makes them stand out from the others, a unique skill. WaterClan are trained to swim in even the strongest currents, MoonClan are experts at blending into the shadows, and so on. Because of those different skills, each Clan has its own way of honing them in their apprentices. WaterClan teach their kits to swim before they're even six moons old. MoonClan often train their apprentices at night instead of during the day. In the end, the way Clans train their young cats is what keeps them unique."

Rosethorn shook her head mentally. How was Cherryfur always so good at explaining everything? Acornpaw and Crowpaw seemed utterly fascinated by everything she'd said, and had listened as attentively as they did to their mother when being scolded. *Maybe it's just a thing senior warriors are good at, holding other cats' attention.*

"We're nearly there," Beestripe called from the front of the patrol. "It smells like we're the last Clan to arrive, so we should hurry."

"Right," Cherryfur concluded. "Crowpaw, come stay beside me until I say you can go."

"The same goes for you," Rosethorn told Acornpaw. Her dark ginger apprentice nodded obediently—if a bit grudgingly as well.

"Beestripe's definitely right," Acornpaw murmured. "I can smell all the other Clans up ahead. I remember their scents from the tour of SunClan territory. They all smell so different, but under all of that it's just...cats. I've never scented so many cats in one place."

Rosethorn realized Acornpaw looked a bit daunted for the first time. She ran her tail-tip over her spine reassuringly. "You'll be fine. Remember, SunClan is here, too."

"Of course I'll be fine!" The momentary doubt in Acornpaw's expression was gone, and she held her head high. "It's not like I'm nervous or anything. I've wanted this since I was a kit."

Rosethorn didn't respond, twitching her whiskers with barely disguised amusement. *There's nothing wrong with being scared, you know!*

That thought took her back, suddenly, to her first night as an apprentice. The night Minnowpaw had argued that true warriors should always be fearless, no matter what. Cherryfur had scolded her, saying that fear was precisely what brought out courage in warriors, and that it was okay to be scared sometimes. Minnowpaw hadn't believed her, though she didn't let it show.

I suppose Minnowtail was always different from the rest of us, Rosethorn mused, feeling an unexpected flash of understanding for her former Clanmate. *Maybe she was meant to be with the rogues before they even came to the forest.*

She had never been very fond of Minnowtail, but somehow began to feel a little sympathetic for her. Now that she was gone, with a new group of cats, Rosethorn hoped she would be more comfortable where she was. So long as she didn't cause any more trouble for SunClan.

Pulling herself back to the present, Rosethorn gazed at Acornpaw, who was just ahead of her, curiously examining her surroundings. *I'll never let you stray from the warrior code,* she promised silently. *You'll grow up to be a warrior as loyal and honorable as those around you.*

The other three Clans turned to look at their patrol as they brushed past the shield of undergrowth that guarded the Moontree. It was much thinner now, though—as Rosethorn had said—the Moontree looked no different, holding on to its evergreen beauty. Her pelt burned with the feeling of being watched, though she sensed no

unfriendliness. Not even from FireClan, who seemed to have finally let go of their anger at the border dispute they'd had with SunClan.

A dispute that, she realized suddenly, *was caused by the same cats that are here as new apprentices today*.

Noticing Nightshade close by, Rosethorn moved to stand by him. "I wonder what Amberstar will think of our new apprentices," she whispered to him. "She must remember them from the fox attack."

"Good question," Nightshade responded. "But she wasn't there at the border that day, right? Would she even recognize them, or their names?"

"She's a Clan leader," Rosethorn reminded him. "How could she *not* know?"

Nightshade murmured acknowledgment to that. Then he asked, "She won't try and make a scene because of it, will she? I wouldn't put it past her..."

"Well, it's not like it would make any difference. That incident was moons ago; it's all in the past. I'm surprised FireClan even held on to their grudges for so long."

"So you don't think we should be worried?"

"I think that we shouldn't let touchy cats from rival Clans get to us." Rosethorn looked around at the cats on her patrol, her eyes resting on each apprentice as they went. "This is all of the new apprentices' special night, and we shouldn't let worries or *what-if*s spoil that."

As if she had sensed Rosethorn's eyes on her, Acornpaw turned to look at her. "Can I go talk to other cats now?" she pleaded.

Rosethorn nodded. "Be polite, and *behave*!" she called after her apprentice. Soon after her sister and brothers were eagerly following after her.

She looked back at Nightshade and shook her head. He purred and shrugged, as if saying, *Apprentices will be apprentices!*

"Hello, Rosethorn!" The sound of Shadetail's friendly greeting caught her attention. She spotted the FireClan warrior approaching her and Nightshade.

"Hi there, Shadetail," she responded. "How are you?"

"Freezing," Shadetail answered, his whiskers twitching. "And a little hungry, but who isn't in leaf-bare?" He glanced curiously at Nightshade. "I've seen you before, but I don't think we've talked. You're...Nightshade, right?"

Nightshade nodded. "It's good to meet you," he said. Looking sideways at Rosethorn, he added, "Have you talked at Gatherings before?"

"Yeah." Rosethorn braced herself for what she was going to say next. "He was a friend of...of Pineclaw's. We started talking after he was killed."

"A good friend," Shadetail agreed sadly. "We may not have been Clanmates, but I still miss talking to him. He shouldn't have died."

"He shouldn't have," Rosethorn agreed huskily. Nightshade, likely sending her grief, pressed his flank against hers. She took comfort in the familiar warmth of his pelt.

"Well," Shadetail went on, clearly eager to lift the mood, "I came to see you because I saw a bunch of younger-looking cats walking around. From SunClan. Did Rainfoot's kits finally become apprentices?"

"They sure did," Nightshade mewed. "And Rosethorn and I are the mentors to two of them!"

"That's fantastic!" Shadetail purred. "Congratulations. Rosethorn, did Adderstar let you mentor Acornkit?"

"Yes, she's my apprentice," Rosethorn replied, happiness returning to her tone. "She's a furball of energy, but that's what makes her fun to train. And she's a very fast learner."

"What about you, Nightshade?" Shadetail prompted. "Which kit is

your apprentice?"

"I got Flashpaw," Nightshade answered. "He's about as energetic as Acornpaw, but not as competitive. He likes learning at his own pace. I don't think he minds if his siblings learn a little faster than he does; he's just excited to finally be an apprentice, like Shadowpool and I were when we became apprentices."

"Speaking of Shadowpool," Shadetail meowed, "I've heard some strange rumors about Minnowtail from other cats here. She's his sister, right? Is she here at the Gathering?"

"Yes, she is his sister," Rosethorn said in a low voice. Beside her, Nightshade was stiff as a tree branch. "What rumors have you heard?"

"Lots of things," Shadetail admitted. "Some cats are saying she left SunClan, or that she killed one of her own Clanmates. Others thought she was killed by a rogue...strange rumors, indeed." He stared at Rosethorn. "Is any of it true? I really hope not."

Rosethorn sighed. "Unfortunately, some of it *is* true. Minnowtail did leave SunClan, willingly. We gathered a patrol to go fight the rogues and drive them away from our territory. She came with us. It turned out she had been plotting with the rogues; giving them inside information, and warning them that we were going to attack. She betrayed us and joined the rogues, and fought against us."

"Great StarClan, that's *awful*." Shadetail shook his head. "I always thought Minnowtail was a decent cat. Never in my whole life would I have guessed she'd do something like this."

"That makes two of us," Nightshade spoke up roughly. "And take that from someone who trained beside her, slept in the same *den* as her every day for moons."

Shadetail gazed at him sympathetically. Rosethorn pressed her nose to his ear in an attempt to comfort him too.

Their silence was broken by some FireClan warrior yowling Shadetail's name. He rolled his eyes—Rosethorn guessed he knew

who was calling for him—and meowed, "I guess I should go. It was great to talk to both of you. See you later!"

"Goodbye," Rosethorn called after him.

Nightshade stared after him, still looking a bit distracted by memories of Minnowtail. "He seems nice," he commented.

Rosethorn nodded in agreement, just as a commanding yowl echoed over the Gathering. It was Troutstar of WaterClan, who balanced gracefully on his branch of the Moontree, his sharp green eyes glowing with moonlight. Almost immediately after, Acornpaw and Flashpaw scurried through the throng of cats to sit beside their mentors.

"He looks kind of scary," Flashpaw whispered. "Which leader is he?"

"That's Troutstar, WaterClan's leader," Nightshade answered. "Be very respectful and don't talk while he—or any of the leaders—are talking."

Flashpaw nodded hard, craning his neck to see Troutstar properly. Acornpaw, who was bigger than him, didn't have any trouble seeing him, which Rosethorn found mildly amusing.

Now that the clearing was silent, Troutstar cleared his throat. "Two new warriors have joined WaterClan's ranks," he announced. "Duskpaw and Willowpaw are now Duskwhisker and Willownose."

"Duskwhisker! Willownose!" As the crowd of cats began to cheer the new warriors' names, Rosethorn noticed that Acornpaw was happily cheering along with them. *I'd bet it's because she knows* they'll *be cheering for* her *someday,* she thought wryly.

"The river that surrounds our territory is still frozen in most places," Troutstar continued. "But we can still fish through the parts that aren't..."

The WaterClan leader trailed off, his eyes fixing suddenly on the sky. Rosethorn followed his gaze. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized that there were wisps of dark clouds—almost black—beginning to cover the moon.

The caterwauls began moments later.

"Clouds are covering the moon!"

"Where did they come from?"

"Is StarClan upset with us? Why?"

Rosethorn exchanged a horrified glance with Nightshade, who had just seen the sky too. "But t-the sky was perfectly clear just a while ago!" he stammered. "Where in the world did those clouds come from?"

"I don't know," Rosethorn replied, fighting to keep the fear out of her voice. Acornpaw and Flashpaw were glancing around in confusion. *We need to stay calm so they don't start to panic, too*, she told herself. *There* must *be a good reason StarClan is upset!*

Suddenly Adderstar's voice rose up over the chaotic cries of the cats below him. "Wait!" he yowled. Those aren't clouds that are covering the moon!"

The cries died down into frantic whispers as the Clans heard his words. One cat yelled, "Then what are they?"

Rosethorn watched Adderstar closely. He was staring with narrowed eyes at the "clouds," his nose twitching madly as if he could smell something odd. All of a sudden his eyes widened, so much that she could see rings of white around them even from a distance.

"It's not clouds," he hissed, his tail lashing and his ears pinned back. "It's *smoke*. Coming from SunClan territory. The forest is on fire!"

Chapter 46

Time seemed to move too slow and too fast at the same time. All Dawnfire could focus on were the caterwauls of her Clanmates, some panicking and others giving orders, their voices nearly drowned out by the distant yet vicious crackling of the forest fire.

"Check every den! No cat gets left behind!"

"Where are we supposed to go?"

"What if something happened to the Gathering patrol?"

Dawnfire gasped aloud as the question registered in her mind. A quarter of the Clan was gone, on their way to the Gathering. Did they know what was happening? Had they been *in* the forest when the fire began? *StarClan, protect us all.*

But could StarClan truly protect them from something that was bound to happen?

Dawnfire wondered anxiously if Grayleaf would know that this was connected to the prophecy. She had known the moment Beestripe had told her; surely her older and more experienced mentor would know, too. And if Grayleaf *did* know, she would be able to help Adderstar understand how dire this situation really was. How quickly they needed to get back to help the rest of the Clan.

"Dawnfire, don't just stand there! We need to get out!" Shadowpool, who had been ahead of her as they were heading for the crowd of cats by the fern tunnel, had stopped to look back at her.

Dawnfire realized she had froze as her racing thoughts had drifted. "Sorry!" she yelped, running ahead of him. *He can't see how stressed I am. None of the warriors know about the prophecy, and they don't need to worry about something beyond their control.*

"Dawnfire!" Patchflower broke away from the rest of the cats to run

towards her. She pressed her nose fiercely against her daughter's. "Are you alright?" she demanded.

"Just dazed." Dawnfire drew nervously away from her mother. "I'll be okay. It's Shadowpool and Brokenstem I'm worried about. They're already sick; breathing in smoke won't do them any good."

"Hopefully we won't be breathing smoke," Patchflower growled. "Beestripe sent out Hazelfrost and Forestfire to figure out where the fire is spreading from. Then he'll figure out where we should go to stay as far from it as possible."

"Sounds like a good plan," Dawnfire panted. "But what about the Gathering patrol? They won't have any idea where we are. Surely they've noticed the fire by now, wherever they are."

Patchflower's green eyes flickered with fear; Dawnfire knew both her mate and one of her daughters were with that patrol. *I know just how worried you are. That's my father and sister.*

"Wherever they are," the tortoiseshell echoed, "they have Adderstar to lead them and Grayleaf to care for them if they get hurt. They'll be all right."

Dawnfire let her mother's words sink in, trying with all her heart to believe them. There was no way to know if there were any cats meant to be part of the prophecy's events—all she knew for certain was that it involved a fire, and that a "bloodstained flower" that would somehow save the "sun." Anything could happen. Not even StarClan themselves knew what was going to happen now...and that was the scariest part of it all.

She thought of Violetsky, who was undoubtedly trying to see her Clan through the sheet of smoke that blocked Silverpelt from the living world. Who appeared in her dreams time and time again, telling her that everything would be okay in the end, even when she herself didn't know what would become of her Clan. *I wish I could have the kind of certainty she has.*

"Beestripe, we're back!" The crowd of cats suddenly parted as Forestfire and Hazelfrost sprinted back into camp. Their eyes were

as round as the full moon, which had rapidly disappeared beneath the smoke that was drenching the night sky.

Beestripe came forward to stand in front of the two she-cats. "Did you figure out anything useful?" he demanded.

"We think the fire's coming from MoonClan's direction," Forestfire panted. "Whether it started in their territory, we don't know. But it's coming from that direction."

A faint memory tugged feebly at the edges of Dawnfire's mind, but she was too stressed to pull it closer, and it vanished.

"Okay." Beestripe paced back and forth, his golden eyes narrowed to thoughtful slits. "If it's spreading from that direction, then our best bet would be to move towards the edge of Clan territory. We won't leave the territory unless we have to, but we can stay near the border."

"We'll go spread the word and get everyone ready to go," Hazelfrost said. She glanced at Dawnfire, who was listening a couple tail-lengths away, and nodded briskly before whisking around to forward the news to the rest of the Clan. Forestfire quickly followed behind her.

"This doesn't feel right," Beestripe sighed all of a sudden. His posture slackened with exhaustion and worry. He wouldn't look at Dawnfire.

She blinked at him, taking a few pawsteps closer to him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, the...the *timing* of it all. The fire started right after the Gathering patrol left. And there haven't been any recent signs that a fire might happen; if anything, leaf-bare is the time a fire is *least* likely to happen. And now part of SunClan is separated from the rest, with a wall of fire blocking them from getting to us."

The SunClan deputy sighed again, deeper, and finally looked at Dawnfire. "Am I just overthinking this? Or does StarClan have something to do with this? You of all the cats here should know."

Dawnfire's heart skipped a beat. The words of the prophecy echoed in her head as if she were standing in a giant cave. *Beestripe has good intuition,* she thought. *I suppose there's no point in hiding the truth. Not* all *of it, at least.*

"Yes, the forest fire..." She struggled for words that wouldn't reveal how dire the situation truly was. "StarClan predicted it, if in a vague way. Grayleaf and I knew something was coming. We just didn't know what exactly that was. And...now we do."

Beestripe nodded slowly, narrowing his eyes. Dawnfire couldn't tell exactly what he was thinking, but she could assume he suspected there was something she wasn't telling him. *I've never been that great of a liar.*

The SunClan deputy straightened up, retaining his authoritative stance. "We need to leave the camp now," he meowed briskly. "Did you want to take any herbs or supplies with you?"

Dawnfire shook her head, grudging but certain. "Cargo would only slow us down. We'll need to be quick."

Beestripe nodded again. "Then let's get going. And hope that the Gathering patrol gets through all this safely."

It only took a few heartbeats for the deputy to begin leading the Clan out of camp, but to Dawnfire it felt like an eternity. She suppressed small coughs as the smoke came lower to the ground at an alarming speed. She could taste the acrid smell on her tongue, and spat in disgust. *So much for not breathing in smoke.*

Now that they were out in the forest, the roar of the fire was like the sound of dozens of Thunderpaths laden with monsters. Dawnfire began to pant, half from her barely suppressed panic and half from the almost overwhelming heat. She hadn't felt this much heat since she was just a kit, buried in Patchflower's lush belly fur to keep herself warm. And considering she'd been getting used to the leaf-bare chill, it was certainly a strange feeling. The warmth was nice...but it was so unnatural.

"Look!" Ebonypelt screeched, breaking the tense silence of the Clan.

She was frozen, her eyes fixed on something above them. As the rest of the Clan followed her gaze, so did Dawnfire. Her mouth fell open in a state of shock.

Not far away from where they were standing, there were multiple oak trees completely engulfed in flames, the bright orange streaks climbing rapidly up their bare trunks and branches. Glowing bits of ash fluttered down like the snow had not too long ago. It was a sight Dawnfire only ever thought she'd see in her dreams. Knowing that this wasn't something she could wake up from made it all the more terrifying.

"We need to keep moving!" Beestripe shouted. "Come on, let's go."

The Clan bunched closer together and kept walking. Dawnfire lifted a paw to follow them, but froze.

One of the burning trees closer to them was making an awful groaning sound. Dawnfire felt a powerful vibrating sensation through the ground beneath her paws, and dug her claws into the ground to stop herself from staggering.

"What was that?" she asked nervously, to no one in particular, casting a look at her Clanmates. No one answered. They all seemed to be paralyzed with fear; even Beestripe would not tear his eyes from the tree.

Bewildered, Dawnfire looked back up, and realized with a jolt that the tree that had made that horrible sound was now ever so slowly tipping over.

Tipping directly towards the SunClan cats.

At that moment Beestripe shrieked, "*Run!*" At his word the entire Clan surged forward, desperate to get away from the falling tree. Every cat except Dawnfire, who found herself completely rooted to the ground no matter how badly her instincts screamed at her to *move*.

It wasn't long before her Clanmates realized she was behind them, paralyzed by fear. One by one they skidded to a halt and began

yowling her name, begging her to run. But to Dawnfire their voices were distant and incoherent. All she could really hear was the tree, as it fell faster and faster, almost straight towards her. It almost looked like a beam of deadly sunlight, brighter and more sickening than anything she had seen before.

And with the loudest crash she'd ever heard in her life, the tree slammed into the earth merely fox-lengths away from her.

Dawnfire was thrown backwards by the force of the impact. As she smashed into the ground, an excruciating wave of heat overwhelmed her, scorching her pelt. She screeched at the sheer agony of it, squeezing her eyes shut and thinking, *This is how I'm going to die.*

Flashbacks of her first prophetic dream swam hazily through her head. The fire surrounding her menacingly; her mutilated reflection staring blankly back at her through the crystal-clear water. The face she'd likely be wearing when her Clanmates found her scorched corpse in the aftermath of the fire. If she wasn't nothing but ashes by then.

In the distance, above the crackling of flames that seemed to be all around her, she thought she could hear Violetsky calling her name. Calling for her and telling her that everything was going to be okay, that *she* would be okay. Dawnfire let the comforting sound of her voice draw her closer to the peaceful sleep that was beginning to wash over her, dulling her pain and making everything seem so wonderfully hazy...

"*Dawnfire*! Dawnfire, please, *please* wake up. Open your eyes. *Look at me*!"

Violetsky's voice suddenly became clearer, and sounded much less like Violetsky. Confused and still feeling groggy, Dawnfire forced her eyes to flutter open. Staring down at her was not Violetsky, but Rosethorn, her brilliant green eyes huge with fear and grief.

Rosethorn... The look on her sister's face gave her an unexpected burst of desire to *not* die, to *not* let this be her end. She owed it to her, to Quickstorm and Patchflower, to Grayleaf, to all her friends.

Even if she wasn't going to make it, the best she could do was try.

"Yes!" Rosethorn's eyes widened even more with sheer relief. "Oh, thank StarClan. Stay with me, Dawnfire. Please don't close your eyes again."

"What...how did you g-get here?" Dawnfire rasped weakly. She coughed as she spoke, aware that the inside of her throat felt coated with ash, and that the air around them was foggy with smoke. "W-what happened?"

"We left the Gathering as soon as we saw the smoke in the sky," Rosethorn explained rapidly. "When the tree fell, I got separated from the rest of the patrol, but I didn't get too badly hurt. The patrol's on the other side. And then I saw you lying here...oh, I'm *so* glad you aren't dead."

"We were r-running from the...the fire," Dawnfire managed. "The rest of us. They're on...the other s-side, too."

"That explains why you were out here," Rosethorn muttered. "Okay, I'm going to help you stand. We have to find away to get past this tree before the fire takes over this part of the forest."

Dawnfire nodded feebly. Her sister pushed her head beneath her flank, and a sudden, powerful pain lanced through her. She shrieked in protest.

"Sorry!" Rosethorn gasped. "The sparks from the tree must've seared your whole pelt. Fox dung, how do I move you?"

"S'okay," Dawnfire panted. "I can try and stand on my own."

"Be careful!" Rosethorn said in a shrill voice. "And I'm right here if you need me."

Taking a deep breath to brace herself for the pain she knew was coming, Dawnfire pressed her paws into the warm grass and pushed up with all the strength she could muster. Just as she'd expected, the worst agony she'd ever felt, worse than it was in her dream and worse than what she'd felt when she thought her sister was dead, struck her like a bolt of lightning. It was enough to make her

trembling legs fold underneath her. But then Rosethorn was there, pushing her up determinedly, yowling desperate encouragement.

And then she was upright, her entire body aching relentlessly and half of her weight supported by her sister. Dawnfire looked around to see her beloved forest almost entirely up in flames. The fallen tree crackled so loud it made her flinch. She glanced down and saw her own blood staining the grass, which was tipped black with its own scorch marks.

"Are you okay, Dawnfire?" Rosethorn asked urgently.

"No," Dawnfire coughed, having just enough energy to feel exasperated at such an obvious question. "Not at all. Now how do we get over this tree?"

"I've no idea," Rosethorn rasped, her own voice husky from breathing in smoke. "But there's got to be something we can do. We *have* to get to the rest of the Clan! They must think we're both dead."

"We might as well be," Dawnfire murmured. She stared hopelessly at the blazing fire that surrounded them, almost feeling like she was back in her dream. *How could anyone escape this?*

"Don't say that," Rosethorn whispered. "We can't give up, not while we still have the strength to keep going. If I have to try to get over this tree until my fur's been burned away, I will. I owe the Clan that much for all they've done for me."

Dawnfire took a deep breath, resisting her urge to cough again. "Whatever you want to do, I'm with you," she said. "I'm your sister; I'll always trust you, no matter what. Either we make it out of this together, or we die side by side. There's no other options for us, but I'm okay with that. As long as we do this together."

Rosethorn touched her nose to Dawnfire's. "Together," she echoed in a quiet, raspy purr.

They stayed like that for what seemed like seasons, foreheads pressed together as the forest slowly burned down around them. For

a brief, bittersweet moment, Dawnfire was content to just stay here, with the cat she loved most in the world, until the flames swallowed them up and they were both nothing but ashes.

Chapter 47

"Rosethorn, Dawnfire! Is that you?"

Dawnfire and her sister were abruptly jolted out of the moment they'd been sharing by a familiar voice. Raising their heads in surprise, they realized a narrow gap had formed between the flames on the fallen tree. And through that gap they could see the cat who had called for them—Nightshade—peering at them hopefully through the fire.

"Nightshade, thank StarClan! It's us, we're here!" Rosethorn yowled, her voice laced with joy.

Even weaker than before with relief, Dawnfire had to lean a bit heavier on her sister's shoulder. *I was so sure we were going to die here. But now, maybe, we have a real chance.*

"Everyone, it's them! They're alive!" Nightshade shouted to the SunClan cats, who Dawnfire could just see gathered behind him—all of them, including the ones that had gone to the Gathering. They all let out trills and yowls of astonishment and joy.

Beside her, Rosethorn was beginning to tremble. She could sense her sister felt as relieved as she did. "How do we get to you?" she called to Nightshade.

"Maybe you could jump through this gap in the fire, if you leap high enough!" Nightshade responded.

"I could," Rosethorn meowed, "but Dawnfire can't. She was hurt when the tree fell; she's too weak. There's got to be something else we can try!"

Normally Dawnfire would have argued indignantly that she could make the leap if she tried hard enough, but this time she agreed with Rosethorn. In her scorched state, there was no way she'd have enough power in her leap to clear the burning tree.

"I don't think there *is* anything else you could try, Rosethorn." Nightshade's voice cracked as he spoke; Dawnfire couldn't even begin to imagine what he was going through now. "The fire's surrounding you on all sides. There's nowhere else to go."

"I am *not* leaving my sister here," Rosethorn hissed fiercely. She was trembling harder now.

"Rosethorn, it's okay," Dawnfire said quietly so only her sister could hear her. "Just go without me. It'll be—"

"*No*," Rosethorn growled. "I'll never leave you behind. It's like you said: either we make it out together, or we die trying together. I'm not having this any other way."

"That was before we had a possible way to escape!" Dawnfire argued. "You have to go. I don't want to be the reason you die. I won't!"

"I'm not going," Rosethorn said. Dawnfire detected a hint of a sob in her voice, and her heart cracked with sorrow.

"You have to hurry," Nightshade shouted. "The flames are rising again; the gap might not come back!"

Rosethorn looked from her best friend and the rest of her Clan, to her sister, and back again. Her eyes held the most fear Dawnfire had ever seen in a creature's eyes.

"Rosethorn, *go*," she urged softly. "I wish it didn't have to be this way, but *I can't make it across that gap*. You and I both know that. You can't sacrifice the whole life you have ahead of you for me."

Rosethorn turned her head until she was staring into her eyes, her muzzle less than a mouse-length from her own. "Yes, I can," she whispered. "I will *not* lose you like I lost Pineclaw. And besides," she added a bit tentatively, "I'll see him again in StarClan. I'll be happy there with him, and with you."

"You're already happy here!" Dawnfire insisted. "You have Nightshade, and Shadowpool, and Patchflower and Quickstorm. You have the whole Clan! You can't just let yourself die with me,

even though you could have made it out. You have so much more to live for than me. And think of what you'd be doing to the Clan!"

Rosethorn only shook her head slowly; her mouth parted but no words came out. Before she could say anything, the flames on the tree danced up for a brief moment. They lowered quickly, but even then they were still higher than they'd been before.

"Rosethorn!" Nightshade yowled on the other side, his tone high with fear.

In a heartbeat Dawnfire made her decision. "I'm sorry," she rasped to Rosethorn. "I love you. I'll always watch over you from StarClan, I promise."

And with that, she shoved her sister forward with every bit of strength she had left. Pain coursed through her as she did so—physical and emotional—but she ignored it. Rosethorn, who seemingly hadn't expected it, was flung forward, straight toward the flames. Dawnfire watched her sister as, likely on instinct, she leaped as high as she could to avoid the fire. She easily cleared the tree and landed heavily on the other side. Just as she hit the ground, the fire blazed upward. This time it didn't go back down.

Dawnfire's view of the the Clan that had raised her, of her impossible escape, was gone.

Seeing her sister leap through the fire caused a memory to spring up at the edge of Dawnfire's mind once again. For lack of anything else to do, she tried to grasp it once more, to pull it close enough to know what it was. But once again it evaded her grip, and disappeared from her mind.

Shaking her head, Dawnfire told herself, *It doesn't matter. You're going to die, anyway.*

"No, you're not."

Dawnfire spun around, startled, to find none other than Violetsky standing right behind her. Her pelt still blazed with bright stars, and her beautiful blue eyes held the same warmth they always did.

But the color of her fur was barely visible. She looked just like she had when she had first revealed herself to Dawnfire, in the middle of the forest.

"You're here," Dawnfire breathed. Her aching shoulders fell with relief that, soon, all her pain would be gone. Violetsky would lead her to StarClan, and SunClan would escape the forest until the fire was gone, and everything would be all right in the end.

"I'm here," Violetsky purred, and the mere sound of her voice was comforting. It was smooth, completely unaffected by the smoky air. "I couldn't see the forest through all the smoke, but I managed to break through, just barely. Now come; you must follow me."

"I can barely walk," Dawnfire protested with a weak cough.

"Lean on me," Violetsky instructed. "I may not be able to heal your wounds—all the herbs here have withered—but I can help you until we get to our destination."

Our destination, Dawnfire thought with a peaceful sigh. *StarClan. I think I'm ready.*

She staggered over to Violetsky and practically collapsed on her flank, panting from the effort. "Let's go."

Her ghostly friend led her toward a patch of burning bushes just a couple fox-lengths from the fallen tree. "There's a small space under them," she explained, "where the fire hasn't reached just yet. You should be able to crawl through, but you'll need to be quick."

Dawnfire briefly wondered why she couldn't just let herself burn—she would get to StarClan all the same, right?—but was too dazed to put much thought into it. Instead she simply did as she was told, finding it easier to move when her belly as well as her legs were supporting her weight. It still hurt like a bite from a fox.

When Violetsky scrambled through after her, Dawnfire suddenly asked, "When Rosethorn was injured by that rogue as—" A bout of smoke-induced coughing interrupted her, but she continued stubbornly. "—as an apprentice, you knew she wasn't going to die.

Is she going to survive now, too?" *That's the only way this could be worth it...*

Violetsky gave her a sad look. "I don't know," she answered quietly. "I...I never knew. When I told you she was going to survive, it was off of my own intuition."

Dawnfire stared at her, suddenly dumbfounded. "I-intuition?" she stammered. "What do you mean?"

"StarClan can warn the living of what we know is coming, but we cannot predict the future," Violetsky explained. "But I told you your sister would survive because...I do not know how or why, but there is something...*different* about Rosethorn. All of StarClan knew right from when you two were born; there's something special about *both* of you. We may never know exactly what it is, but I can promise you that she wouldn't die unless it was for a very good reason."

Dawnfire lifted her drooping head to respond, but her words became a yowl of surprise when the flames around them suddenly burst higher, igniting the bush they'd been standing next to. Violetsky nimbly dove between the blazing leaves and Dawnfire, who gasped as she watched the sparks fly against her StarClan friend's pelt.

To her surprise, they diminished as soon as they hit Violetsky's near-transparent body. She winced and hissed, quickly shaking her pelt to put out the sparks before they could ignite her pelt.

"Are you alright?" Dawnfire gasped.

"It's nothing I can't handle," Violetsky insisted. She pressed her shoulder against Dawnfire's, who gratefully leaned on her again for support. "We must keep going; we're running out of time."

"What do you mean, 'running out of time?'" Dawnfire panted as they stumbled along. "StarClan isn't going anywhere, right?"

Violetsky said nothing.

The pair stopped abruptly at a part of the fallen tree that was just barely propped up by the thickest of branches. Everything about it

—the giant trunk lifted up by much thinner support, the fact that most of it was on fire—screamed *unstable*. Dawnfire imagined the branches snapping while a cat was under them, sending the trunk crashing down, and shuddered.

As if she'd read her thoughts, Violetsky spoke up in an apologetic but urgent tone. "You have to crawl under this. Do it quickly, before it all collapses."

"Seriously?" Dawnfire spluttered, body still aching and chest tight from breathing the tainted air. "Violetsky, why are you—"

"Go!" Violetsky hissed, nudging her fiercely with her shoulder.

With a growl Dawnfire let herself fall to the ground, pushing herself forward as fast as she could with her legs. She tried to ignore that her fur was fried black and stained with ash and blood. Tried to ignore the menacing waves of heat pulsing from the burning tree as she made her way beneath it, grunting with pain and the exhausting effort of pulling herself forward.

Why is Violetsky making me do all this if I'm just going to StarClan? she asked herself frustratedly. *I'm already half-dead. I've made my peace. I'm* ready.

Suddenly her exhaustion got the best of her, and she groaned, going limp while she was still under the tree. This was torture; she didn't want to do this anymore. For a few agonized heartbeats, getting rid of the pain was all she wanted to do, even if it didn't mean going to StarClan.

And then Violetsky was behind her, pushing her with her forepaws and hissing, "You *have* to make it! Keep going!" The sheer desperation in her voice was unexpected, and it gave Dawnfire the last jolt of motivation she needed to haul herself forward one last time.

Then she was lying on her side, panting and coughing, in another tiny clearing. She was a few fox-lengths from the tree; even through her blurred vision she could see it outlined in the flames. Violetsky stood over her—perhaps she'd dragged her further away from the

tree?—and was saying her name repeatedly.

"I'm awake," she rasped, her words slurred with pure exhaustion and barely coherent.

"Good." Violetsky sighed. Her voice turned into a purr. "You don't need to worry anymore. You can rest."

"Rest," Dawnfire echoed softly. The last time she'd sounded this relieved was when she'd returned from her first medicine cat meeting to find her sister awake and energetic, unbothered by her rogue-made injuries.

She was beginning to slip away again, into that sleep that seemed so peaceful and tempting, when Violetsky suddenly shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Grayleaf! She's over here!"

That was the last thing Dawnfire heard before her world went dark.

Chapter 48

Rosethorn lay with her flank pressed against her sister's, eyes closed. The feeling of Dawnfire's slow but steady breathing was the one thing keeping her from giving in to her tiredness. She'd almost lost Dawnfire before, and she wasn't about to let that happen again. She wouldn't rest until she could be certain her sister would be okay.

Vivid memories flashed against her eyelids, memories of all the terrible things that had happened today.

The scent of fear wafting from all sides of the Gathering as SunClan's group rushed back home. Running straight into a forest that was burning to the ground. Watching the tree fall and separate herself from her Clanmates. Finding Dawnfire's scorched body sprawled on the ground, and the sharp stab of grief when she thought her sister was dead. A feeling of devastation unlike anything she'd ever experienced—even worse than realizing Pineclaw was dead—when Dawnfire sacrificed her own life to save hers.

And then, the confusion when Grayleaf suddenly darted off to the left, leaping over the burning undergrowth with an urgency Rosethorn hadn't ever seen in her movements before. The total shock when she called moments later, "It's Dawnfire! She made it to the other side!"

Quickstorm and Patchflower—who had just enough energy left to be joyfully astounded that their other daughter was alive, too—had carried her unconscious body with the help of Thrushtail and Thumpstep. Together the Clan had narrowly escaped the forest and found refuge in a small copse of pines outside their territory.

The Clan had dedicated the shadiest area of the clearing to Grayleaf without hesitation, so that Dawnfire would have as much shelter as possible while she was being cared for. Rosethorn was there now, laying wide awake beside her sister, numbly watching the sun as it

rose. The brilliant colors reminded her of the fire, and suddenly she turned her head, unable to watch any longer.

Nightshade was coming towards her. He had fallen asleep as soon as he was given the chance, like most of the Clan; the nap seemed to have done wonders for him. He looked a lot more energetic, though his movements were still slowed from shock and worry.

"Hey," he murmured to Rosethorn, ducking into the shade. He seemed to be keeping his voice down, so as not to wake anyone up. "How is she?" His pale gaze shifted to Dawnfire.

"No worse," Rosethorn sighed. "But not much better, either. Grayleaf says her condition is stable, but she isn't sure when she'll wake up."

"Speaking of," Nightshade said, "have you gotten any sleep? You look exhausted."

Rosethorn shook her head and looked back at her sleeping sister.

"Dawnfire would want you to get some rest," he reminded her gently. "She's going to be okay, but *you* won't be if you don't sleep."

"I'm not worried about *me*," said Rosethorn stubbornly. Silently she added, *Pineclaw was okay, too, until a rogue tore him to pieces. Anything can happen.*

"Well, I am." Nightshade crouched beside her. He was still rather warm from the makeshift nest he'd been sleeping in, and she found that warmth comforting. "Look, how about this. I'll stay with her while you go rest up. If anything happens, I'll come and get you. Deal?"

Rosethorn looked at him, then back at Dawnfire. Nightshade had been her friend ever since she was a kit, and he had never wronged her—and though she had wronged him, he had forgiven her and stayed beside her through everything. *I can always trust him.*

"Alright, fine," she sighed. She sounded reluctant, but in truth her body was yowling at her to sleep. "But if she so much as *twitches*—"

"You'll be the first to know. Besides Grayleaf, of course," Nightshade

added wryly. "I promise."

Rosethorn nodded heavily. She hoped her old friend knew just how thankful she was as she took one final look at Dawnfire, then trudged away.

Off to the side of all the makeshift nests the Clan had built at the edge of the copse, Nightshade's sat empty. It was, still warm and smelled strongly of him. Supposing he wouldn't mind, Rosethorn collapsed into it, suddenly aware of just how exhausted she really was.

In a matter of heartbeats she was fast asleep, with Nightshade's familiar scent wreathing around her and Dawnfire's steady breathing the last thing she thought of before the world was blotted out.

* * *

Rosethorn's sleep was peaceful, undisturbed by dreams. A soft, steady pattering sound made her stir. She realized with a jolt that it was rain when icy drops pelted her as they dripped from the pine trees above.

As she groggily scrambled into a more sheltered spot, her first instinct was to be irritated by the sudden rain. Then she reminded herself that the rain would put out any parts of the forest that were still on fire, and make it safer for SunClan to come back home. *Perhaps StarClan brought the rain for us.*

Rosethorn lifted her head, squinting to see through the drizzle. Much of the Clan was awake now, making the most of what little they had left. There was a fresh-kill pile—a measly one, but it was better than nothing—off to the side of the clearing where the prey wouldn't get wet. Beestripe was sorting out patrols to hunt more and find herbs for Grayleaf; some cats were already helping the elderly medicine cat sort her scarce supplies. Other cats were huddling in groups, sharing tongues to clean the blood and residue off of one another.

Besides Rosethorn, the only sleeping cats were the four apprentices,

who must've been even more exhausted than she was after everything they'd been through. *Those poor things,* she thought with a mix of sadness and sympathy. *Their first Gathering, completely spoiled by all of this.*

Just as Rosethorn was beginning to scold herself for not being more helpful, a shocked yowl echoed through the temporary camp. It was Grayleaf. *What in the—*

"Dawnfire! Dawnfire's waking up!" Grayleaf called before she could even complete the thought.

In a heartbeat Rosethorn was on her feet, racing across the clearing while shaking her head to clear the grogginess from sleeping. The rain soaked her through, but she didn't care. The mass of cats gathered around Grayleaf's makeshift den parted to let her through —she was, after all, Dawnfire's littermate.

She was abruptly stopped by Grayleaf, who gave her a stern look from piercing blue eyes. "If you're looking to talk to her, you can't right now," she stated. "She's still taking everything in, and she needs time to—"

"Grayleaf. It's okay, she can come see me."

Hearing Dawnfire's voice again was one of the most relieving things Rosethorn had ever experienced. She looked at her sister, who was sitting upright—albeit lopsidedly—and staring back at her with too many emotions to put into words. Grayleaf looked at her, then back at Rosethorn, indecisive about what to do.

"*Grayleaf*." Dawnfire blinked at her mentor reassuringly. "Talking to my sister isn't going to kill me. Just let her through, please."

Grayleaf sighed. "Fine," she grunted, moving aside to let Rosethorn approach Dawnfire.

"You have no idea how happy I am that you're awake," Rosethorn whispered. She pressed close to Dawnfire, breathing in her familiar scent and taking in her warmth like a kit that just wanted to be comforted.

"I'm happy to be awake, too," Dawnfire purred. She blinked rapidly, looking around as if she couldn't quite process where she was. "We aren't in SunClan's forest anymore, are we?"

"Definitely not. We're just outside of it, though. Hopefully this rain will douse the remainder of the fire so we can get back home soon." Rosethorn shuddered. "Living among ashes doesn't sound appealing, but it would still be better than this."

"I agree. I don't like being in such a strange place," Dawnfire meowed. "It's too unfamiliar. At least back in the forest we know the territory. We know it's safe, and even when it isn't we know where to go."

"Speaking of knowing where to go..." Rosethorn began. "Dawnfire, how in StarClan's name did you *escape*? There was nowhere for us to go, except over the tree, which...you know. And yet you still made it to the other side...how?"

Dawnfire suddenly looked lost in a sea of flashbacks and memories; her dark golden eyes were misty and distracted, and her claws dug into the moss of her nest. Then her pensive visage vanished, and she raised her head again. "Go get Grayleaf," she said. "And Adderstar. I need to talk to them, now."

"W-what? You didn't answer my question."

"Just do it. It's important." Dawnfire stared at her, unblinking.

Flicking her tail-tip in exasperation, Rosethorn darted away to find Grayleaf and Adderstar. *This must be pretty important, to need the medicine cat* and *the Clan leader,* she thought. *What's going on with Dawnfire?*

It wasn't hard to find Adderstar and Grayleaf; they were talking quietly at the edge of the crowd of cats. Rosethorn padded up to them, respectfully dipping her head to Adderstar.

"Dawnfire wanted to talk to both of you," she said. "She said it was something important."

Adderstar's ear twitched curiously. "Is that so?"

"Well, when Dawnfire says something is urgent, she's usually not exaggerating," Grayleaf mewed. "Let's go see her."

Rosethorn walked alongside them as they hurried back to the makeshift medicine den. Dawnfire looked tense even from a distance, her eyes narrowed and claws still flexing into the moss. She relaxed a little when she saw them coming towards her.

"What's this about, Dawnfire?" Adderstar asked slowly. He and Grayleaf sat down across from Dawnfire, their ears pricked attentively, but Rosethorn hung back. *She probably only wants them to hear what she's saying, but...*

Dawnfire opened her mouth to speak; then her eyes flitted to Rosethorn. She blinked, seemingly understanding her hesitation. "It's alright," she mewed. "You can stay. Actually, you need to hear this as much as they do."

"O-okay." Rosethorn was even more intrigued now. She stepped forward and settled into a crouch, flanking Adderstar.

"So, Grayleaf, do you remember my...my first dream? From StarClan?" Dawnfire asked.

Grayleaf nodded. Her eyes narrowed. Rosethorn could have sworn that she glanced at her; the medicine cat probably had. This was, after all, something that was supposed to stay between medicine cats and, on occasion, the Clan leader. *I didn't even know Dawnfire was having dreams from StarClan, outside of the half-moon meetings!*

"I remember Grayleaf telling me about it, too," said Adderstar. "What about it?"

"Well, in that dream there was a fire. A *huge* fire, in our forest." Dawnfire's hackles rose slightly as she talked; Rosethorn imagined remembering such a scary dream wasn't easy. *I would know.* "Something that stuck out to me was that, in the dream, the fire was spreading down from our borders with MoonClan and the Twolegplace."

"The real fire spread from the same area..." Adderstar muttered. "So

you think your dream was warning us about this?"

"*Every* dream I've had was warning us about this," Dawnfire growled. "And...I don't think they were *just* warnings. I...I think they were trying to tell us who did it."

"Who did what?" Rosethorn asked. "You've lost me."

Adderstar and Grayleaf exchanged a bewildered glance; clearly they felt the same. Dawnfire huffed, her ears flicking with exasperation.

"Isn't it obvious?" she went on. "Think about it! The rogues haven't stopped intruding on our territory since we realized they were here. And my dreams started just after the first battle with them. And then, out of nowhere they just *vanish*. No signs of them on our territory for moons on end—and Minnowtail, a former SunClan warrior who knows our territory, and knows that some of us would be at the Gathering at the full moon, is with them. And just when we start to think they're gone for good, *this* happens."

Her wide eyes rested on Grayleaf first, then Adderstar, and, finally, Rosethorn. The look in her sister's eyes, willing her to understand, made something in the back of her mind click.

"You think the rogues are responsible for the fire," she said. "Dawnfire, how could they have done this? I mean, everything you said is true, but how would cats start an entire forest fire? It's just...it's not possible."

"But it *is*!" Dawnfire hissed. "They live in the Twolegplace! The Twolegs have little pits, surrounded by big stones. They light fires inside them and sit around them, all the time. The rogues easily could have made one of those fires spread to the forest, especially with Minnowtail's help—"

"*Or* a Twoleg fire could have gotten out of control on its own," Adderstar interrupted. "We have no real evidence that the rogues were responsible. This could all just be one big coincidence."

"I know," Dawnfire sighed frustratedly. "I could be paranoid. I could be overthinking this. Or maybe I'm just desperate for an explanation

to something that only StarClan foresaw. But if there's even the slightest chance that the rogues really were responsible, then we have to find out for sure. Because if it *is* their fault, then we would be betraying our own Clan by letting them get away with this."

"I agree with her," Rosethorn meowed quietly. "Our own cats could have died that night." She looked pointedly at her sister; her amber eyes were dark. "If the rogues had anything to do with the fire, then we can't let them go unpunished."

"All right," Grayleaf said heavily. "If we were to figure out if the rogues started the forest fire, how would we do it? As far as we know, there are still no signs of any rogue cats on our territory."

"There might be now. We didn't exactly have time to patrol the Twolegplace border while the forest was burning down," Rosethorn said sarcastically.

"Right," Dawnfire agreed. "I was thinking that Rosethorn could head back into the forest and look for any new evidence of rogues nearby. That's why I wanted you to hear this," she added to her sister. "You're the most capable warrior in the Clan when it comes to facing these cats. You've fought them the most out of all of us; you know how they go about things. You're the best warrior we have for this."

"You're not wrong about any of that," Adderstar conceded. "But I don't like the idea of her doing this on her own. There's no way to know how many rogues could be around, if there are any. She should have a few cats go with her."

"Believe me, Adderstar," Dawnfire replied softly, "I wouldn't even be asking her to do this if I didn't think it was the right way to do it. She'll be less likely to get caught if she's on her own, anyways. StarClan will protect her."

Her tone called attention to the words *StarClan will protect her,* and Rosethorn's ears pricked. It felt almost like a joke that she couldn't understand, and that no one would explain to her. *What does Dawnfire know that she isn't telling anyone about?* she asked herself.

"Well, what do you think, Rosethorn?" Adderstar prompted. "Do you want any cats to go with you, or do you want to go alone? It's your choice."

Rosethorn gazed at Dawnfire softly. Her voice trembled just a little as she repeated the words Dawnfire had said to her when they were trapped by the fire: "She's my sister. I trust her, no matter what. If she thinks it's safer for me to go alone, then I will."

Dawnfire blinked slowly at her in response, and Rosethorn knew she remembered too.

"Then it's settled," Adderstar said briskly. "You should get going now; if the rogues truly have returned, then we might not have much time before they disappear again. I'll inform the Clan of what you're doing, and then I think we'll make our way back to the camp and see how much damage was done." The SunClan leader looked over his shoulder at the rest of the clearing, and his Clan. "I know I'm not the only one who wants to go home."

"Good luck," Dawnfire whispered. "StarClan guide you." She stretched her head forward, and Rosethorn followed suit. Their noses touched in a loving gesture. Quieter so that only she could hear, Dawnfire added, "Don't even *think* about not coming back to us. We all need you."

"I'll come back," Rosethorn whispered, licking her sister's cheek. Reluctantly she pulled away, and got to her paws.

As she sprinted briskly out of the pine copse, part of her felt terrified of the things she might find. But another part of her was cold and stony, feeling nothing but anticipation of, just maybe, getting revenge on all the cats who had wronged her at last.

Chapter 49

Returning to SunClan territory—what was left of it, at least—was like crossing the border into a whole other world, a gloomy and dead world. Back at the temporary camp, where the fire had not touched the land, the grass was green and the needles on the pine trees were even greener. But here...

Everywhere Rosethorn looked, all she saw was black. Black grass, scorched away or smeared with fallen ash. Black trees, their trunks sickeningly bare, with no leaves and barely any branches anymore. Everything was quiet and still; most of the prey was likely dead or hiding away in terror.

It was all so eerie, seeing her home like this, and Rosethorn suddenly wished she hadn't come here alone. But she reminded herself that she was doing this by herself to keep her Clan safe as well as herself. *Just focus on your mission.*

Taking a deep breath, and trying to ignore the air's sickly smell, she started to walk.

The light rain had stopped now, but the damage was already done—the ash that stained everything was damp and slimy. Rosethorn wrinkled her nose in disgust as she padded through the mess. Her tortoiseshell fur was naturally dark, but now her paws were even darker. *My fur is going to taste like ashes for moons,* she groaned inwardly.

In an attempt to distract herself from the mess, she tried to imagine what the SunClan camp looked like now. She predicted there would be damage in some areas, like the front camp wall, but that it wouldn't be too bad. The camp was positioned not far from the lower edge of their territory, which was one of the few places left untouched by the fire.

As unlucky as all this is, she mused, *I suppose there are still a few things we got lucky with.*

A *lot* of things that had happened, she realized, were through sheer luck. From the fact that the camp was probably still habitable, all the way to the fact that she and Dawnfire had survived their ordeal. That *all* the SunClan cats had survived. Though that could have just been StarClan looking out for them, not luck.

Rosethorn found that her mind kept drifting back to Dawnfire. The memory of Grayleaf darting away and just *magically* finding Dawnfire alive was still vivid, and had replayed in her head more than once.

That, she decided, *must* have had something to do with StarClan. Dawnfire and Grayleaf were both medicine cats, after all. They had special connections to their ancestors. Perhaps Grayleaf had received a message from them telling her that Dawnfire was still alive, and where to find her.

But that didn't explain *how* Dawnfire had even made it to the other side of the fallen tree. Her fur had been seared right to the skin, and all the fight left in her spirit had been torn out of her. Plus, there had been no visible way out of their fiery prison—except over the tree, but making that jump had been out of the question for her.

Rosethorn remembered that, when she'd asked her sister how she made it out, Dawnfire hadn't answered and had instead changed the subject. *I'll get a straight answer out of her eventually,* she resolved. *I thought she was going to die; the fact that she didn't, against all the odds, deserves an explanation.*

Rosethorn took lighter steps the closer she got to the Twolegplace border. Instinctively her ears strained to catch any sounds of life, and her mouth opened to taste the air. So far there hadn't been a single sign of the rogues; then again, she was still getting used to smelling things through the smoky air.

That could be a good thing, she reasoned. *It means the rogues would probably have a hard time smelling me, too.*

Despite all the dead and ashy scents, Rosethorn could still smell the strange reek of the Twolegplace up ahead. It was still strangely quiet, especially for a place that was normally swarming with

Twolegs. *Maybe the fire scared them, too, and they're hiding in those big stone nests.*

Stifling a shiver, Rosethorn kept going, determined to find out how the fire might have started. She made it all the way to the fences that protected the Twoleg gardens before the grass started to look green and alive again. It seemed the fire hadn't come far enough to harm the Twolegplace—save for a few scorch marks along the white fencing.

Now what? Rosethorn asked herself. She wrinkled her nose. *I'd rather not go into the Twolegplace.*

She decided she would walk all along the border and search for any signs of the rogues, or places where the forest fire could have begun. *If push comes to shove, I'll just have to go into the Twolegplace.*

Rosethorn began walking to the right, along the white fences and towards the spot where they connected with the MoonClan border. She kept her nose low to the ground, determined not to return to the Clan without a clue of what might have happened. She had to find some way to help her Clanmates understand this sudden tragedy—whether that meant simply going on with life or waging a revenge war against the rogues, she didn't know yet. She hoped desperately that she would soon. Not knowing was eating her up on the inside, like ants were crawling through her.

She was just beginning to stiffen with frustration when she noticed something odd. At the line between the green and blackened grass, a thick, dark line of the latter trailed through the former. A thin, scorched path meandering its way all the way to the Twoleg fences, where a jagged hole let it through to the other side.

The trail almost looked like a smoky-gray snake. Rosethorn's hackles lifted at the sight of it just as they would have if it *was* a snake. What she was looking at now wasn't natural, she knew that for certain. Fires didn't move in narrow lines like this, and then spread out all of a sudden. They consumed anything within their reach that they could burn—and yet the grass on either side of the trail was totally untouched by flames.

No, this wasn't natural at all.

Taking a moment to steady herself, Rosethorn crept closer to the fence and examined the hole that the ash trail snaked through. It reminded her vaguely of the secret tunnel that used to be behind the elder's den, the one she and Nightshade snuck out of camp through. It was rimmed with a dark stain of ash, and had jagged edges as if it were a mouth with razor-sharp teeth.

It was too small for her to fit through, so Rosethorn backed up and instead cleared the fence in one leap. She landed as lightly as she could, acutely aware that rogues could be hiding anywhere around here.

Shaking herself, she glanced to where the hole in the fence was. The ash trail slithered off to the side and wound around the Twoleg nest that the garden belonged to. Narrowing her eyes, Rosethorn dropped low to the ground in a hunter-like stance and crawled forward soundlessly.

The unfamiliar sights and smells unnerved her a great deal, but she refused to let herself back down. Now that she had a trail to follow —in a literal sense—she couldn't leave until she knew exactly what had happened. It was clear this hadn't been an accident—someone had to have been here to make sure the fire didn't spread over the whole garden too—but who had *done* this was still a mystery.

It could have been a Twoleg; they do things for no apparent reason all the time, Rosethorn thought. *But it also could have been a rogue. I just have to keep looking for evidence.*

Cautiously she turned the corner, keeping one flank pressed to the cold stone wall. She found the chill oddly comforting; since leaf-bare had begun she'd loathed being cold, but now she was craving the feeling. It was infinitely better than being as hot as she had been yesterday.

It was still rather quiet, save for the distant yapping of dogs and yowls of Twoleg kits. Rosethorn wasn't worried about them; she was worried about the sight that was before her.

The ash trail led haphazardly up to a strange Twoleg structure, getting wider the closer it got. There were no flames or smoke, but the area smelled strongly of fire and burnt wood. It sent chills down Rosethorn's spine, and these chills were the opposite of comforting.

Stay calm, she told herself stubbornly, trying to calm her thoroughly frayed nerves. *There's no danger right now. You're fine. You can do this.*

She forced her paws to carry her forward so she could investigate the Twoleg structure. It was a large circle made out of big colored stones. One of the stones was knocked sideways, creating an opening. Through here, the trail of burnt grass Rosethorn had been following connected to the massive pile of ash that filled the inside of the circle.

Rosethorn could hear her heart pounding in her ears, as loud as the tree had been when it crashed to the ground right before her eyes. *Dawnfire mentioned big stone circles that Twolegs built to make fires inside of,* she thought, mind racing. *That's what this thing is. Something must have pushed one of the stones aside to let the fire out of the circle...and then guided it all the way to the forest.*

Rosethorn felt stuck between hyperventilating and being unable to breathe. Every bone in her body, every hair on her pelt told her that she needed to leave, that the Clan could finish investigating this later. That this was a dangerous place and that risking her life for this wasn't worth it. She felt like, any moment now, a swarm of rogues would appear and rip her trembling body to pieces before she had time to defend herself.

Her mind was suddenly drawn back in time, to something Cherryfur had told her and her friends as apprentices. *Real warriors should always feel fear, because being fearful means you truly know what you're up against. And that's where courage comes from, because you are still willing to face the danger even though you're scared. It is the beast, not the warrior, that has no fear in his heart.*

The senior warrior's voice echoed in Rosethorn's head, the voice of a cat she had admired and looked up to since she was a kit. Slowly she stopped shaking.

I'm a real warrior. I'm scared, scared out of my mind, but that's okay. Fear breeds courage. I have to have courage.

Images flitted through her head. Nightshade, Dawnfire, Patchflower, Quickstorm, Acornpaw and her siblings, Grayleaf, Adderstar...one by one, the faces of all her Clanmates flashed in her head.

I'm doing this for them. This is to keep them safe.

And knowing that, by risking her own life, she was protecting the lives of the ones she cared about was enough to get her moving forward again, slowly, toward the fire pit.

The stench of burnt things was overwhelming now, but beneath it Rosethorn could just barely make out another scent. After everything she'd already seen, she wasn't *really* surprised, but her heart still skipped a beat as she identified the smell. *The rogues. They're back.*

They did this to us.

In that moment of clarity, Rosethorn felt a kind of rage she was all too familiar with. The kind of rage she felt as she watched Pineclaw bleed out right before her eyes. The rage she felt as she lay awake some nights, simply staring at the clump of black-and-white fur she had used to identify her mentor's killer. The rage someone feels when the ones they love are harmed by another.

In that moment of clarity, she knew she would rather die than let these cats get away with what they did to her Clan. Somehow she would make them pay for it all—not just Pineclaw's murder, but everything before and after that, too. *None* of it would go unpunished.

Rosethorn's fury was interrupted by a sudden loud rustling behind her, and a cat's voice, shrill with fear, calling her name. "Rosethorn! Are you here?"

The cat revealed herself, stumbling out of the garden growth in a dazed and clumsy fashion. With her spiked pelt, she looked twice

her size, and her eyes were huge with the same terror her voice carried.

Stunned, Rosethorn stared at her. "Acornpaw! What in StarClan's name are you doing here? What's wrong?"

Acornpaw's head drooped; she was panting hard. "They...they sent me," she managed in a raspy voice. "To get you back. Rosethorn, you have to come quick. The rogues...they're at the camp!"

Chapter 50

"*What*?" Rosethorn gasped. As she spoke, her breath hitched painfully in her throat. "What do you mean, they're *at our camp*?"

"Exactly what you think it means!" Acornpaw hissed. Normally Rosethorn would have scolded her for being so blunt, but this situation was so dire she couldn't care less how her apprentice spoke right now. "I can explain on the way, but we have to hurry back. A battle could've started already!"

The rogues. Invading our own camp. StarClan help us all. In a haze of fear, fury, and shock, Rosethorn sprinted beside Acornpaw as they jumped over the fence and back into SunClan territory. Back into the utterly destroyed forest that she could hardly bear to look at, let alone accept that it was real.

"Start talking," she demanded, breathless as she put most of her effort into running. Despite wanting to move as fast as she could, she forced herself to slow down a bit; Acornpaw wouldn't be able to keep up if she ran at full speed.

"No one's really sure how it happened," panted Acornpaw. "All we know is that they must have snuck across the territory after the fire stopped and waited for us there. They were expecting us...that was the worst part. Like *we* were the ones invading *their* home. It was sickening."

"The rogues were responsible for the fire," Rosethorn said bluntly. "They must have started it as revenge for...for me killing Poppy. They waited for us to evacuate, and then moved into our camp after the fire went out. From the beginning, their motive was to take our territory as theirs. This is their way of trying."

"But...setting their supposed future home on *fire*?" Acornpaw replied incredulously. "How does that make any sense?"

"Newleaf is on its way," Rosethorn answered. "The forest will grow

back stronger than it was before the fire, which would be good for them." She hissed, wishing she could stop and claw at one of the scorched trees until her paws ached. Anything to get rid of this boiling anger. "They're smart. I'm the last cat in the world who would want to admit that, but it's true."

"They must have been planning this for ages now," Acornpaw gasped. "That's why they left us alone for so long: to get us to let our guard down and think we were safe, that we'd won. But the whole time..."

The ginger apprentice trailed off, then said despairingly, "You're right. These cats really *do* know what they're doing."

"Don't worry," Rosethorn said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. "We're just as smart as them. We'll find a way to drive them out of here for good. How many rogues were there? Did you see Zodiac, or...Minnowtail?"

"There were a lot," Acornpaw growled. "Enough to match our whole Clan. Zodiac confronted us when we came through the fern tunnel, but I didn't see Minnowtail anywhere. She could've stayed behind, or she could've been somewhere behind all the other cats so she wouldn't be seen. I don't know. I didn't have much time to look before Beestripe told me to slip away and find you."

"I *know* Minnowtail had something to do with all this," snarled Rosethorn darkly. "She wanted revenge on us as much as the rest of the rogues did. I'd bet my life that she gave Zodiac the information she needed to orchestrate all this, and she did it willingly." *Slimy piece of fox-dung,* she added to herself furiously. *How could any good cat betray the ones who raised them like this?* Her claws itched with the hope of tearing Minnowtail's face open from her ear to her jaw once they got back to the camp.

As the pieces of the rogues' scheme assembled in her head, Rosethorn's fury only increased. It was a hideously perfect plan. Set the forest on fire, and drive SunClan out of their territory. Find their camp, with Minnowtail's assistance, and lie in wait until they returned. No SunClan cat ever could have seen it coming. And yet it pained her that she hadn't understood it all until it was too late.

"Do you think she taught them how we fight, too?" Acornpaw asked anxiously. "They could know all of our tricks, and we wouldn't even realize until it was too late!"

"I wouldn't put it past her." Rosethorn felt she needed to be as honest as she could; if Acornpaw wasn't prepared for what was bound to happen, she could wind up dead. "Just remember all your battle training. You may not be a warrior yet, but you're skilled enough to hold your own. And you have the whole Clan watching your back. They won't let anything bad happen to you." *I won't let anything bad happen to you.*

"I hope my littermates are okay," Acornpaw whimpered. Suddenly Rosethorn was reminded of how young her apprentice really was, and her heart cracked a little.

She thought of Dawnfire, awake but still weak from her injuries. Was she okay? Were she and Grayleaf already treating their Clanmates' wounds? *I have to get there,* she thought, struggling not to panic.

As they approached the camp—the worn path to the fern tunnel was still recognizable, thank StarClan—she began to smell the rogues. Her heart sped up in horror. The smell of SunClan that had always been here was barely distinguishable now. Almost all she could smell was ash and rogue.

"I don't smell any blood," Acornpaw mewed. Her voice was low. "That's good, right?"

Rosethorn nodded. "That's good," she said.

She slid in front of her apprentice protectively, signaling for her to be quiet. She was starting to hear voices as the fern tunnel came into view; some she recognized and others she didn't, but all laced with hostility. *They're still talking,* she thought, letting herself be relieved for a moment. *The fighting hasn't begun yet. We made it just in time.*

As they crept silently through the fern tunnel, Rosethorn realized her Clanmates were backed against the wall. A line of familiar pelts

blocked her view of the rest of the camp, all bristling with fury.

She caught sight of Nightshade standing with Flashpaw, and slid through the crowd with Acornpaw following hurriedly behind her. Several cats murmured tense greetings to her, welcoming her back from her mission, and she nodded curtly to them. She didn't want to draw any extra attention from the rogues, who could get ticked off.

Nightshade looked over her shoulder, seemingly curious about why some cats had spoken. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Rosethorn coming towards him.

"You're back," he breathed, obviously relieved. "I was starting to wonder if something bad had happened to you."

"I'm alright," Rosethorn quickly reassured her best friend. "What's going on? I know what happened, but who's talking to who?"

"Adderstar is confronting Zodiac," Nightshade muttered grimly. "This is *bad*, Rosethorn. There's so many of them, and they all look like they've been eating plenty. Strong and healthy. But SunClan...we've been going hungry more often than not."

"We can beat them." Rosethorn willed both Nightshade and herself to believe it. "We'll find a way to drive them away. StarClan won't let them destroy us; I believe that much."

"But *how*?" Nightshade hissed. "How do we defeat cats who are stronger than us *and* have the advantage?"

Rosethorn thought hard about that question. The obvious answer was that there was no way to win, but the simplest answers weren't always the right ones. "Remember the plan we had the last time we fought them?" she said at last. "It's the same now as it was before. We need to kill Zodiac. Then they'll realize they're without a leader, and they'll scatter." *And I need to find that black-and-white cat before they all flee,* she added silently.

Nightshade sighed, but none of the tension in his posture subsided. "I hope so," was all he said, before he turned his attention back to Adderstar's and Zodiac's conversation—if you could even call it a

conversation. Rosethorn followed suit.

"One last chance," Adderstar was saying in a chillingly furious tone. The usually-calm SunClan leader rarely lost his temper, but this was one of those rare occurrences. Rosethorn imagined what he must've looked like as he spoke: ears flat to his head, dark golden eyes narrowed to slits, tabby pelt bristling and tail lashing, his glinting claws scraping at the earth as he fought not to lash out at Zodiac right then and there. She shuddered. "I will give you and your followers *one last chance* to leave this place. Not just our camp, but the forest you have desecrated, the Twolegplace you have hidden in. Never show your faces here again. One last chance to end this all peacefully. That's what I'm offering you."

Rosethorn almost jumped as she heard Zodiac's voice clearly for the first time in moons. The rogue leader's tone was mocking, a half-laugh, half-snarl.

"End this *peacefully*, eh, Adderstar?" Clearly Minnowtail must have told her the Clan leader's name. "You of all the cats here should know there can be no *peaceful* outcome to this. Both sides of this conflict have gone too far in the ways of revenge."

"'Too far?'" Adderstar hissed. "*We* have killed one of your own. *You* have killed one of our own, burned half our forest to ashes, and invaded our home. I see only one side of this conflict that has gone 'too far.' And it would be wise of you to take my offer, because after all you've done, it will not stand for much longer. I'm not often one for mercy, especially for cats like yours."

Various SunClan cats let out menacing growls and caterwauls of agreement. But the rogues were just as eager, responding in a chorus of threatening yowls that made Rosethorn feel as if ants were crawling through her fur.

"Easy, now." Zodiac seemed to be addressing her own cats now, but her voice had not lost its trademark wry edge. "Don't get all riled up yet. Adderstar still wants to make *peace*."

She spat out the word *peace* like it was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard. The rest of the rogues seemed to agree; Rosethorn heard

low snickers coming from them. She wished she could see them, could slash off the smug looks she knew were on their faces.

"I don't believe my warriors are in the mood for jokes," Adderstar said icily. "The choice is yours. Accept, and I will let you leave with no trouble. Decline, and my warriors and I will rip you all apart without a second thought."

There was a moment of terrible, dreadful silence. Rosethorn wished desperately she could see what was going on, but too many cats stood in her way. Instead she was forced to wait and listen for Zodiac's answer, feeling as if she were suffocating in the tight space she was crammed into.

What answer do I want her to give?

There was no time to answer her own question, because out of nowhere a single word rang out across the SunClan camp. Zodiac's voice, stone cold.

"*Attack*."

All at once the weight that Rosethorn felt was crushing her vanished, as her Clanmates surged forward to meet the tide of rogues that was undoubtedly rushing toward them. Every muscle in her body tensed up with anticipation; it was time to fight.

"Find your siblings! Stay with them, and fight together," she hissed to Acornpaw, who stared ahead, wide-eyed with fear. "I'll help you when I can. *You can do this,* Acornpaw."

Snapped out of her shocked state, Acornpaw's eyes hardened surprisingly fast. She nodded once, and the next thing Rosethorn knew she was vanishing into the mass of screeching cats. *StarClan be with you,* she breathed after her.

Her pelt prickled suddenly, and she turned to see a rogue speeding right towards her, claws catching the sunlight. It was a tom, just a little bigger than her, his dark ginger fur reminding her of fire. A fire that *his* kind used to destroy her home.

Rosethorn's blood boiled with fresh fury as she rolled sideways,

dodging his attack. Springing back to her paws in a heartbeat, she saw him standing still and watching her. His eyes were a yellowish-green, but startlingly dark from the feelings that swam in their depths.

"I know you," he snarled. "You killed her. You killed Poppy, you *murderer*!"

His voice was strained. Rosethorn almost thought he sounded heartbroken, but didn't have time to decide. He lunged for her again recklessly, and this time she sprang into the air, dodging him a second time, and landing square on his back as she came down. She sank her claws into his shoulders, pinning him harshly, and clamped her teeth over his ear. He screeched, writhing madly beneath her. "I'm gonna *kill* you!" he shrieked. "I'll rip your throat open, too, so you can feel exactly what she felt!"

For a moment Rosethorn was caught off guard, remembering vividly that she had killed Poppy by tearing her throat. She suddenly wondered what Poppy had meant to this cat. He seemed about the same age she was—or had been—so perhaps they'd been siblings. Or maybe they had been mates.

These thoughts made her feel sick. This cat was really only trying to avenge the death of someone he had cared about—she had that in common with him, did she not? So how could she justify her own intentions if she didn't justify his?

All of a sudden Rosethorn didn't know whether she wanted to hurt this cat anymore.

The rogue had clearly noticed her moment of vulnerability. With a vicious snarl he pushed himself upward, unbalancing her and causing her to topple over. Within heartbeats he was on top of her, ripping at her flanks with all four paws and hissing triumphantly. Rosethorn yowled and struggled viciously beneath his grip, but he wasn't letting go.

"You couldn't do it, could you?" he cackled. He had a frightening gleam in his eyes; he looked out of his mind. "Not this time? Well, I can."

Just as he bared his teeth for the killing strike, a large shape barreled into his side and sent them both tumbling away from Rosethorn. With a gasp she heaved herself to her paws, and recognized Hazelfrost as the cat who'd saved her. The dark brown she-cat was lifting her head to look at her; the fur around her mouth was stained with blood that wasn't her own, and her eyes were grim. Beside her, the rogue was sprawled on his back, blood pulsing from the gash in his throat at a sickeningly fast pace. His paws twitched one more time, and then he was still, his eyes fluttering shut.

Rosethorn swallowed the bile that tried to rise in her mouth. "Thanks for that," she panted to Hazelfrost. She decided not to mention the reason the rogue had targeted her, pushing her guilty thoughts to the back of her mind. *I can't focus on that now.*

Hazelfrost nodded her acknowledgment to the thanks. "I owed you," was all she said in reply.

Standing still for a moment, Rosethorn scanned the battlefield. She had never seen so many cats in the camp at once, and most of the pelts she saw were unfamiliar. *There really* are *more rogues than SunClan cats.* Acornpaw and all her siblings were ferociously swarming a large, battle-scarred rogue. She felt a brief stab of pride —that was *her* apprentice, skillfully scoring her claws across the rogue's flank, sure of her every movement.

But then she also spotted Cherryfur struggling to fight two rogues at once. Further away, a battered Nightshade was flanked by Juniperfur and Shadowpool, who both looked just as battered. They were facing four rogues who hardly had a scratch on them. Thrushtail and Quickstorm were fighting back to back, fending off any enemies that came near, but were already beginning to look tired. Several rogues were trying to target Adderstar; the Clan leader had teamed up with Beestripe and Thumpstep to fight them all.

And last of all, she saw Grayleaf and Dawnfire almost totally hidden behind the elders' den, tending to a cat lying on the ground that she recognized as Rainfoot. The elders themselves were pacing around the den, joined by Birchpelt; the four cats protectively lashed out at

any rogues that came too close. The entire scene made Rosethorn's pounding heart crack a little.

"There's too many of them," she realized aloud. "We need help."

Hazelfrost, who was still standing beside her, pricked her ears. "What are you saying?"

"FireClan," Rosethorn replied, the gears in her head beginning to turn. "I have a friend there. His name is Shadetail. If we went to FireClan and asked them for help, he would support us."

"Shouldn't we go to MoonClan?" Hazelfrost suggested dubiously. "FireClan don't exactly like us that much..."

"Yeah, well, every cat in the forest is going to hear about it if they don't help us," Rosethorn retorted. "And not even FireClan would want that kind of reputation. Besides, MoonClan is too far away, and we don't have much time. So let's *get going*."

She darted away without giving Hazelfrost the chance to reply. She ran with a brisk confidence, but inside she was trembling, praying that Amberstar would send her warriors to help SunClan. Because if they didn't, then there was a good chance most of her Clanmates would be slaughtered.

Chapter 51

Dawnfire found that her mind kept returning to the day she had helped Grayleaf to deliver Rainfoot's kits. The kitting queen had lost a fair amount of blood during the process, but that had been normal. Queens were expected to bleed a lot while they were giving birth.

But nothing about what was in front of her was normal like that had been. Dawnfire was crouched before Rainfoot just as she had all those moons ago, but for the exact opposite reasons. Now, instead of helping to bring life into the world, she was trying to keep life from leaving.

Rainfoot was lying unconscious on one side, her normally soft dark gray fur parted by ugly scratches and gashes and matted with dried blood. Her only movements were her shallow breathing and intermittent twitches of her paws, almost as if she was dreaming. And it was possible she really was, but there was no way to know for certain.

"I'm back!" Grayleaf brushed past Dawnfire, herb bundles in her mouth and tucked precariously under her chin. "Thank StarClan no one tried to attack me. How's she holding up?"

"She passed out just after you left to get supplies," Dawnfire reported anxiously. "Is that bad?"

"It could be from blood loss, or simply because she's exhausted," Grayleaf meowed. "Either way, she's not leaving us just yet. But we still need to work quickly."

She and Grayleaf had been camping in the medicine den when the battle started; the first badly injured cat they'd seen had been Rainfoot. They had bolted out of hiding and begun dragging the poor she-cat towards a hidden area behind the elders' den—it was closer to where she had fallen, and also less obvious. Birchpelt had shown up to fend off any rogues that dared get too close to his

mate, his blue eyes flaring. Now he and the elders were circling the den to make sure no rogues tried to attack them while they were caring for Rainfoot.

"What all did you get?" Dawnfire asked as her mentor began opening the herb wraps. The healing plants had been wrapped in dried oak leaves and secured with cobwebs. Now Grayleaf used those same cobwebs to clean up some of the blood on Rainfoot's fur.

"I couldn't carry much," the medicine cat rasped, "but I think what I did get will be enough for now. Poppy seeds, some goldenrod—some of the flowers grew back, thank StarClan—lavender, and as much marigold as I could carry."

Dawnfire nodded. Something about knowing what supplies they had to work with made her feel a little less anxious. She stepped forward, gingerly pawing the goldenrod stems toward her. "I'll use these for the biggest cuts," she mewed, looking down at Rainfoot's worst injuries: a gash on her hindquarters, and another one running from the base of her neck to a spot just below her shoulders. Both were still bleeding a little, but not as much thanks to Grayleaf's work with the cobwebs.

"Good," Grayleaf said. "Then I'll start on the smaller wounds. And hopefully she'll wake up while we're working."

"How is she?" Both medicine cats looked up as Birchpelt poked his head around the corner of the elders' den. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Rainfoot on the ground. "Why is she asleep? Is that a bad thing?"

"She's only resting," Grayleaf told him. "She lost a lot of blood, and she's exhausted. It's good that she's asleep, because she's recovering her strength better that way."

"Is she going to be okay?" Birchpelt's voice was unbelievably strained, like he was trying to keep a sob out of his voice. Dawnfire's heart ached for him; as a medicine cat, she couldn't imagine what this was like for him.

"She'll be just fine," she promised Birchpelt. "Just keep guarding us

from the rogues, and tell us if you spot any other warriors that really need our help."

Birchpelt nodded slowly. He blinked at her and Grayleaf with a thankfulness that couldn't be expressed with words. Then he spun around and vanished back around the corner. Dawnfire and Grayleaf briskly got to work.

As she chewed the goldenrod flowers into a pulp, Dawnfire thought about Rosethorn. Where was her sister right now? Had Acornpaw found her in time for the battle? She didn't know, because Grayleaf had forced her to stay inside the medicine den. *I'd bet whatever she found at the Twolegplace confirms that the rogues started the fire. It's the only explanation for why they were waiting for us to come back to our camp.*

Suddenly Dawnfire wasn't sure if Sunstar's prophecy had been referring to the forest fire, or to this battle with the rogues. Or both. *Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun.* Her dreams and visions had been of flaming forests and green undergrowth stained crimson. None of that seemed to allude to a great battle.

But still, the battle was, in her opinion, much more of a problem than the fire itself. During the fire, no cats had died—*she* hadn't died, thanks to Violetsky—and the forest would recover well since newleaf was on its way. But in this battle, dozens of cats could die, and from that there was no true recovery.

Rainfoot won't be one of those cats. Dawnfire used that thought to steer her back towards her work. She couldn't let her mind wander too much, lest she make any mistakes.

Gently and evenly she licked the goldenrod pulp into Rainfoot's two largest wounds, which were hardly bleeding anymore. Grayleaf, beside her, was dabbing at smaller cuts with cobwebs and spreading a marigold poultice over them. Dawnfire felt efficient; soon Rainfoot would be all treated, and they would either keep her back here until the battle was over or find some way to move her to the medicine den. Either way, she felt certain the warrior she-cat would be all right.

Both medicine cats jumped as Rainfoot suddenly stirred. Her tail and ears twitched, and her eyes fluttered open dazedly.

"...wait for me..." she coughed out, her gaze cloudy and unfocused. She seemed to be looking at something that wasn't there.

Then she blinked rapidly, noticing Dawnfire and Grayleaf standing over her. "Oh. You're here. Where...am I?"

"Behind the elders' den," Grayleaf said softly. "You fainted, but we brought you back here to care for you. It hasn't been long," she added grimly. "The battle's still going."

"How are you feeling?" Dawnfire asked, trying not to let her anxiety show.

"Tired, mostly," Rainfoot answered, her meow still husky. "Whatever you put on the wounds is working, I think. They don't hurt that much."

"That's the magic of goldenrod," Grayleaf said. Her voice was breathy with relief—Dawnfire knew she was happy Rainfoot was awake, and doing better already.

Rainfoot suddenly glanced back to the spot she had been staring at earlier. "So...you didn't see them?"

"See who?" Dawnfire stuttered. She exchanged a bewildered glance with Grayleaf.

Rainfoot blinked again. "Never mind. I suppose you didn't." She looked around. "I can smell Birchpelt nearby," she mewed. Her voice was a little stronger. "Where is he? Can I see him?"

"Rainfoot! It's okay. I'm right here." Birchpelt suddenly appeared from around the corner again and rushed towards his mate. He slowed down at Grayleaf's stern look—Rainfoot was still weak—but nonetheless pressed his muzzle to hers, purring hard. His pelt had a few new scratches, likely because he'd fought rogues between now and the last time he was here, but none of them looked too serious. Dawnfire wondered how the elders were doing—they had volunteered to help Birchpelt guard Rainfoot, insisting they still had

plenty of fight left in them. *I suppose if something bad* had *happened to them, Birchpelt would have said something, so they must be well enough.*

Rainfoot had closed her eyes, leaning closer to Birchpelt. But her ears perked up, as if she'd heard something, and her eyes snapped open again. Once more she focused on the same spot. *What does she see there?* Dawnfire wondered, confused.

And then, out of nowhere, something shimmery began to fade into view. It was a she-cat, but not one that Dawnfire recognized. Her pelt was a pretty light brown, dappled with spots just a shade darker. Each dot glittered with a single bit of starlight. Her eyes were a bright yellow—startlingly similar to Rainfoot's.

Beside Dawnfire, Grayleaf had stiffened. It was clear from the look on the old she-cat's face that she could see the StarClan spirit too.

"Poppyfoot," her mentor whispered. "Rainfoot's mother. She died in a fight against MoonClan long ago. I knew her when she was alive. Rainfoot wanted Adderstar to name her after her mother, and he did."

Dawnfire stared at Poppyfoot, who was gazing at Rainfoot with the unmistakable tenderness of a mother. "W-why is she here?" she stammered. "Why is a StarClan spirit here? Rainfoot's okay. She's injured, but she's awake and she's going to be fine. They...they're not taking her, are they?"

Her voice rose involuntarily, and she winced as Birchpelt's head snapped toward her. "What do you mean, 'taking her?' What are you talking about?"

"He can't see Poppyfoot," Grayleaf murmured to Dawnfire as she stared at him, speechless. "She's only appearing to us, and Rainfoot."

"Poppyfoot." Rainfoot's shoulders fell as she sighed her mother's name. "You're here, you're really here. I've missed you more than you'll ever know."

"I've missed you just the same," Poppyfoot purred, brushing her

cheek over her daughter's. "All this time, I have watched you become a strong warrior, a loving mate, and a perfect mother. Words cannot express how proud I am."

"I've tried my best to keep your memory alive," Rainfoot meowed. "I've told my kits stories about you, told them how brave of a warrior you are. I raised them just as you raised me."

"Rainfoot, who are you talking to?" Birchpelt was staring at his mate with undisguised confusion and fear. "What's going on?"

"Don't you see her?" Rainfoot looked up at him with round golden eyes, eyes that were just like Poppyfoot's. "My mother. She's here, right in front of you. Grayleaf and Dawnfire can see her."

Birchpelt's face fell, morphing into understanding and horror. Watching him, Dawnfire's heart felt like it was going to break into a million pieces.

He met her eyes. "Is it true?" he said hoarsely.

All she could do was nod.

"It's time to say your goodbyes," Poppyfoot told Rainfoot. Her voice held a faint twinge of regret—of course she didn't like causing her Clan pain by taking Rainfoot away—but clearly this was something that had to be done. *Sometimes StarClan wills things, and their will cannot be denied.*

Rainfoot's eyes squeezed shut. "Do I have to go?" she asked softly. "I'm happy to see you, and I'd be happy to see all my old friends, but...SunClan still needs me. I have a family that needs me. I don't want to leave them behind."

"I know you don't," Poppyfoot responded. "And as much as I want you to live your life, this is how it has to be. StarClan calls you; you must heed their call."

"Rainfoot?" whispered a nervous Birchpelt.

Rainfoot glanced at him, then back at Poppyfoot, then back again. She exhaled a deep breath. "Come here," she called to him.

Birchpelt obeyed, albeit hesitantly. Dawnfire watched him crouch beside her, watched her press her muzzle to his ear lovingly and wistfully. She listened to the words the gray she-cat murmured to him.

"Take care of our kits. Acornpaw has a lot of energy, and you need to help her use it for the right things. And Crowpaw's always trying to compete with her, and his other siblings. Help him realize he doesn't have to be better than everyone. He's perfect just as he is. And Flashpaw—"

"No, Rainfoot, *don't* talk like that," Birchpelt gasped desperately. "Please. You have to stay with us. You're going to be here to watch them grow up, and you're going to teach them all those things *with me*, because they need you just as much as they need me. Please, Rainfoot, don't leave..."

"I have to." Rainfoot's meow sounded more like a sob. "If there was any way for me to stay, I would. But I can't. It's my time; Poppyfoot said so. I can't deny StarClan's will," she sighed, echoing Dawnfire's earlier thoughts.

Birchpelt shook his head in slow motion, his mouth hanging open despairingly. He was shaking, his blue eyes glistening. He stayed silent.

"I love you, always. Tell my kits I love them, that I'll always be watching over them and making sure that they're safe. I'll watch you, too. You won't see me, but I'll always be there. I promise." Rainfoot licked each of his ears tenderly. Her own eyes were glistening, too, but her voice was steady as she turned to Poppyfoot's spirit and said, "I'm ready."

Her mother nodded, her gaze a mix of warmth and sadness. She stepped forward gracefully and bent her head, touching her nose to Rainfoot's. Rainfoot closed her eyes at the contact. Dawnfire could feel the bliss radiating from her, with a terrible sadness laced through it. She knew what the dying she-cat was experiencing was not painful—it was probably quite the opposite—but that didn't make it any easier to witness.

Her breath caught in her throat as another shape rose from Rainfoot's body, just as the latter fell to the ground with a final sigh. The new shape looked just like her, but it was translucent, the landscape behind it just visible through its body. It glowed slightly with the color of a clear greenleaf sky, and stars blazed in its fur like the brightest embers. *Rainfoot's spirit.*

The ghost stepped away from her body and padded to stand beside Poppyfoot. In spirit form mother and daughter looked startlingly similar. It took a lot of effort for Dawnfire not to look away.

Rainfoot's eyes never left Birchpelt, even as she and Poppyfoot began to dissipate as they returned to StarClan, two spirits returning where only one had left.

"I love you, too," Birchpelt whispered, and then they were gone.

Chapter 52

Rosethorn couldn't remember the last time she had ran so fast.

She felt like the wind was carrying her as she sprinted across the territory, Hazelfrost running steadily at her side. Her chest was tight and her paws hardly touched the ground with each stride. Far behind her she could hear the yowls and shrieks of fighting cats, and they only pushed her to move faster.

"What are we going to do once we get to the border?" Hazelfrost panted.

"Dunno." Rosethorn didn't slow down to think about it. "We'll figure that out when we get there."

"They might not help us," Hazelfrost reminded her, not for the first time.

Rosethorn didn't reply. Hope that FireClan would assist them was the main thing keeping her going. She had to try to stay positive.

Back when she was an apprentice, she recalled, staying positive was the easiest thing in the world. But so much had happened to her and her Clan that, now, being an optimist seemed to be one of the *hardest* things to do. She had been forced to grow up quicker than many cats, forced to carry a responsibility that weighed her down as if an enemy was pinning her. This forced maturity had changed her—she was the same cat as before, but somehow in a much different way. Whether this change was good or bad, she wasn't sure. And she wasn't sure she'd ever *be* sure.

All of a sudden she wondered if Pineclaw was watching everything unfold from Silverpelt. Would he tell her he agreed with what she was doing, if he was still alive?

He was always there for me, she thought. *Whether I wanted his protection or not, and whether he was upset with me or not, he was*

always there. I don't think I gave him enough credit for that.

Something told Rosethorn that, if he was alive, Pineclaw would be the one running beside her, instead of Hazelfrost. Even if he disagreed with her idea, she knew he'd still be here, watching over her. Protecting her. Loving her.

She supposed he was doing all that anyway, just from StarClan instead of beside her. But it wasn't the same, because she couldn't do the same for him like she had when he was alive. And that was one thing that had made Pineclaw so special to her—he was never ashamed of asking for help. He was okay with being defended instead of the defender once in a while.

Rosethorn, on the other hand...she was always caught up in her pride. She had grown up telling herself to fight her own battles, to strive to prove her individual strength to the Clan every day. She'd tried to tell herself she didn't need anyone to help her, that she was strong on her own. And she was—she still knew that—but it didn't mean she had to be strong all on her own.

Over time her Clanmates helped her realize that she was never alone in anything, even if she wanted to be. Her sister, Nightshade, her parents, Grayleaf, Pineclaw—they'd all stuck by her even if she told them she didn't need their help.

They knew me better than I knew myself, she realized. *Every time I said I didn't need their help, they knew I really did. And I was just too stubborn to admit that.*

But the truth was, being in a Clan *meant* no cat was ever on their own. The point of the Clans was that cats were stronger together. And her friends and family were the ones that made her truly strong. She had been blind to that truth for so long, but they had helped her see.

That was one change in Rosethorn that she knew was good.

She and Hazelfrost slowed down as they approached the FireClan border, eventually skidding to a halt right at the scent line. The markings were fresh—well, with FireClan they were *always* fresh,

but fresher than usual—but there were no patrols in sight.

"What are we supposed to do?" Hazelfrost growled. "Just sit here and hope another patrol stops by? We don't have that kind of time."

Rosethorn stared across the scent line, sending a quick prayer to StarClan. Then she meowed, "You're right. We don't." And with that, she sprang over the border and raced into FireClan territory.

"Rosethorn! What in StarClan's name are you doing?" Hazelfrost sounded horrified.

"Trying to save SunClan!" she yowled back rebelliously. "Are you helping me or not?"

Hazelfrost muttered something that Rosethorn didn't hear because she was too far away. Moments later, the dark brown she-cat was running alongside her, though discomfort radiated from her.

Rosethorn pondered how long it would be before some cat, or cats, caught them. There were only two of them, but they were still breaking one of the oldest rules of the warrior code. But did that really matter, if it meant saving one of the Clans who had helped to create that code?

Considering neither her nor Hazelfrost actually knew where the FireClan camp was, she assumed it wouldn't be long. It was around sunhigh, after all, so patrols would be out and about. Perhaps the patrol that had marked the border would be the ones who—

Something slammed into Rosethorn's side out of nowhere. She didn't even have time to yowl or fight back before she was shoved into the ground, the breath driven out of her.

Some cat's muzzle was against her ear, and an unfamiliar voice hissed, "Did you really think you could get away with trespassing? You SunClan cats must be even more arrogant than Maplefang says you are."

That's not good, Rosethorn thought. She heard Hazelfrost's muffled curses and assumed there was another cat holding her down, too.

"Wait, please," she gasped. "Give us a chance to explain. We—"

She was interrupted by the loud rustling of grass. Then a familiar voice mewed, "*Rosethorn*? And Hazelfrost? What in StarClan's name are you doing here?"

Shadetail! That's perfect. I was hoping I'd find him.

Rosethorn struggled momentarily, trying to twist herself so she could see the FireClan cats, but the one pinning her growled and dug his claws deeper into her fur. He wasn't drawing blood, but his grip was tight.

"Just let us go and we can explain," she pleaded. "Please, it's urgent. We need your help."

"Not a chance," her captor sneered. "We're not falling for your stupid tricks."

"Thornear, wait a moment," Shadetail said. "Look at their pelts. Those scratches, you didn't make those. They're telling the truth. Something's going on."

"I couldn't care less if something's *going on* with SunClan," the warrior called Thornear hissed. "It doesn't mean they can just waltz onto our territory and expect us to help them!"

"I told you they wouldn't be very polite," Hazelfrost grunted to Rosethorn's left.

"Shut up," said the she-cat that was holding the senior warrior down. She didn't sound familiar to Rosethorn, either. But Hazelfrost's answering hiss definitely did.

"They wouldn't have done this unless it really *was* urgent," Shadetail insisted. "They're good cats!"

"Oh, come *on*," Hazelfrost's captor growled. "'Good cats?' What's next, you saw a flying hedgehog? If you ask me, Shadetail, you've always been a little too fond of SunClan."

"Tell me about it," chirped Thornear. "*A little* is an understatement."

"I'm keeping an open mind, which is more than you can say," Shadetail snapped back. Rosethorn didn't think she'd ever heard him angry before—she also detected a note of hurt in his voice and felt sympathetic. "Okay, they're trespassing. So we need to take them to Amberstar, right? And while we're at it, they can tell her why they need our help so badly. Deal?"

We don't have time for all that! Rosethorn's heart sped up as she fought back panic. Her Clan was depending on this; she and Hazelfrost couldn't waste any time talking about pointless trespassing issues when *cats were dying*.

But she forced herself to lie still and calm as Thornear sighed, "Whatever. But if *anything* happens, it's all on you. I still don't trust a hair on these trespassers' pelts."

"Great." Shadetail sounded relieved. And Rosethorn was relieved that he cared enough to convince his Clanmates to hear them out.

She staggered up once Thornear had slid off of her. She glanced at Hazelfrost, who was also back on her paws, and held her gaze for several heartbeats.

Then, praying she would be fast enough to outrun the FireClan warriors, Rosethorn took off running deeper into the sparse forest.

Hazelfrost groaned, "Not again!" just as Thornear snarled, "Look at what you've done, Shadetail! Get her!"

Adrenaline coursed through Rosethorn, and she pushed harder against the ground, her chest burning as she ran as fast as she could. *I have to find their camp before they catch me. Amberstar has to help us.*

Despite being in a forest completely unfamiliar to her, she still found it easy to pick her way through it. Unlike in SunClan's forest—or how it had been before the fire, at least—there was hardly any undergrowth to trip over or brambles to get stuck in, and pale leaf-bare sunlight illuminated everything. None of it was familiar, but the terrain was easy to cross nonetheless.

As she ran, Rosethorn thought the overwhelming scent of FireClan was getting even stronger. *Could their camp be up ahead?* She hoped it was; Thornear, Shadetail, and the unnamed she-cat sounded just a couple tail-lengths behind her. They were all shouting at her to stop. Even Hazelfrost was running with them, trying to get her to stop before things got even worse. Rosethorn didn't listen.

The quiet sounds of relaxed meows up ahead told Rosethorn she was getting close to the FireClan camp. She suddenly realized she was running along a worn path dotted with countless pawsteps leading in all different directions. *Just like our path. This* is *where their camp is.* There was a line of thorny bushes in front of her, thicker than any other undergrowth in the forest. A narrow tunnel on the right side revealed a way through, and she darted towards it.

"Intruder! Look out!" Thornear screeched. His voice was startlingly close by.

Fear gave Rosethorn a final burst of energy that she used to barrel into the camp. As she slid to an abrupt halt, her legs buckled exhaustedly, and she collapsed.

After a series of stunned gasps, the first thing she heard was, "You call *that* an intruder?"

She was too tired and winded to be irritated or embarrassed.

Hazelfrost was at her side a few heartbeats later. "What is *wrong* with you?" she hissed.

"Didn't have a choice," Rosethorn managed in a breathy voice. She lay on her side, wishing she could sleep right then and there but knowing she couldn't. Her Clan was depending on her—plus, she had also ran straight into the camp of a rival Clan without permission. That too.

Hazelfrost rolled her eyes. "You're the most reckless cat I've ever met. You know we won't be doing much good if we become *prisoners*, right?"

"We won't," coughed Rosethorn.

By the look on Hazelfrost's face, she was pretty sure her Clanmate would have slashed her ears by now if they weren't in the same Clan.

"I'd love to know what's going on here," said an authoritative voice. Rosethorn lifted her head. Amberstar was perched gracefully atop the trunk of an old fallen tree that had, seemingly, become a part of the camp itself. She was all ginger fur and blazing eyes, like a fire about to consume the tree. Rosethorn pushed away the disturbing thought, and stood up with as much grace as she could muster. *I already look like a fool.*

"Amberstar." Thornear addressed his leader with a respect that seemed very uncharacteristic of him, from what Rosethorn had seen. "I'm very sorry about all this. We found them on our territory, saying they needed FireClan's help. But after *Shadetail's* bright idea —" he shot a reproachful look at his flustered Clanmate, "—to let them stand up, they fled from us and managed to find the camp."

"Well, *you* did," Hazelfrost muttered under her breath.

"Shush." Rosethorn nudged her exasperatedly.

To Amberstar, she meowed, "I know this wasn't exactly the best way to ask for your help, but we don't have much time. SunClan is in grave danger."

Amberstar's gaze sharpened curiously. After a moment she nodded. "Go on."

Rosethorn hated having to admit her Clan's weakness, but her only other option was to let them be slaughtered by the rogues, who outnumbered them five to one. "The rogues that began trespassing on our land moons ago have invaded our camp. They could be winning the battle. My Clanmate and I came seeking your help. If you could lend us your warriors, we would have a much better chance of defeating them."

An uproar broke out just as she finished speaking.

"What reason do we have to risk our lives for you?"

"There's no way I'm fighting for SunClan cats!"

"Why does SunClan always want our help?"

"Settle down," Amberstar called, lashing her tail. As her cats quickly quieted, her eyes returned to Rosethorn. "They do make a valid point. FireClan has no reason to help you. In fact, we have reasons to do quite the opposite. Why do you expect me to risk the lives of my warriors for a rival Clan?"

Rosethorn sighed inwardly. *There are no cats in the world more stubborn than FireClan.* But she kept her tone steady and respectful, as she responded, "But that's just it. We don't have to *be* rivals. SunClan and FireClan became enemies over one border incident that happened countless moons ago. Is it really necessary for us to keep holding on to that grudge? For each side to keep blaming the other when, really, they were *both* at fault? It doesn't seem necessary to me."

There was a low murmuring among the crowd of warriors that had surrounded her and Hazelfrost, but no one spoke out directly. Amberstar looked thoughtful. She leapt down from the fallen tree and strode purposefully toward the two SunClan warriors.

"What you say makes sense," she conceded. "But I still don't see a reason to assist you."

"Would you truly have a clear conscience if you refused to help us, even though we pleaded for your assistance?" Hazelfrost challenged. "If any of our warriors died, part of the blood would be on your paws. And you know it."

Amberstar's eyes narrowed as she stopped a fox-length away from them. Rosethorn hoped Hazelfrost hadn't gone too far.

But the FireClan leader's head lowered a little, and she sighed. "No, I would not," she mewed. "And my warriors are healthy and fit to fight. We are as strong as we've always been." Her eyes raked over the crowd. "Are we not?"

The FireClan warriors began to nod, albeit hesitantly. Rosethorn

knew what most of them were thinking: *Just because we're strong doesn't mean we need to use our strength to help another Clan.*

Well, she thought, *the word of any Clan leader is law. They'd be fools not to help if Amberstar said they would.*

"Does that mean you will lend your warriors to our Clan?" Hazelfrost asked. Her face was calm, but her voice betrayed how hopeful she was.

Amberstar nodded. Her own voice was hard but sincere. "Yes. But I will only bring a small amount; I will not leave my camp unguarded."

"Of course," Rosethorn meowed, limp with relief. "Anyone you can spare will make a difference. But we must be quick."

"I'll go, Amberstar!" Shadetail stepped boldly out of the crowd. "I'm ready to fight."

Many of his Clanmates gave him disapproving looks. But another cat, a light gray she-cat with eyes the same color as Shadetail's, padded to stand beside him. Staring at them side by side, they looked a little like siblings to Rosethorn. "I'll come, too," the gray cat said. She looked at Shadetail and added, "If he goes, I go."

"Thank you, Lightstripe," Shadetail said under his breath.

"Well," Amberstar meowed, "anyone else that wants to fight is welcome to volunteer."

Rosethorn watched happily as, slowly, several other cats moved to stand around Lightstripe and Shadetail. She was touched that they were risking their lives to help her Clan—even if some of them were only doing it because Amberstar wanted them to. Assistance was assistance.

FireClan's leader stalked up to her and Hazelfrost, nodding briskly to the latter. "You can lead the way. I'll be with you."

Hazelfrost dipped her head. "Your generosity will not be forgotten soon."

"Your decision will save our Clanmates' lives," Rosethorn added.

Amberstar's gaze flitted between them. "It may also cost lives," she said icily. "And if any of my warriors are killed, remember that *you* instigated their deaths."

Chapter 53

Rosethorn's stomach tightened all over again as she approached the SunClan camp with her FireClan reinforcements in tow. There were still sounds of fighting cats, but the snarls and screeches were less energized. *At least that means my Clanmates are still alive,* she thought bleakly. *I hope it isn't too late to save us.*

She wondered if any cats were dead, and if so, how many. The thought of stumbling upon the dead bodies of Dawnfire, her parents, Nightshade, Acornpaw and her siblings—*any* of her Clanmates, really—made her feel sick. Just Pineclaw alone was almost impossible to bear. Anyone else...

How many more cats that I care about will be killed by rogues before they're gone?

"Hey. Don't think about that." Shadetail was trotting at her side, watching her with concern.

"You don't know what I was thinking about," Rosethorn stuttered dubiously.

"The look on your face tells me enough," Shadetail mewed darkly. "Just try to keep your head clear. If you focus on all the negative things, it'll be harder for you to fight."

"Right. Yeah." Rosethorn turned her face away from him. *Get it together,* she told herself briskly. *They don't need to know how much these cats get to you.*

The patrol stopped just outside the camp; the fern tunnel was in sight. In front of them, Hazelfrost growled to Amberstar, "There's no point in trying to be quiet or stealthy. It'll only waste time."

"Then we charge in, so the rogues don't have a moment to prepare." Amberstar sounded confident. Rosethorn wondered if it was only a facade. "And make sure your Clanmates know we're here to help,

because I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to fight us, too."

"I wouldn't be surprised, either," Hazelfrost scoffed. "No offense."

"None taken."

"Is everyone ready?" Rosethorn called over her shoulder. She was relieved her voice sounded strong and steady. She was feeling the total opposite.

Eager yowls rippled through the FireClan warriors, giving her their answer. Amberstar and Hazelfrost looked back at her.

"Let's do this," she growled.

"Let's," Amberstar echoed. She raised her voice to a chilling caterwaul. "FireClan, with me!"

The warriors surged through the fern tunnel like floodwater. Rosethorn wished it was wider, so more cats could come through at once, but it couldn't be helped.

At last she squeezed through the tunnel, and was in the SunClan camp. It was barely recognizable. Partly because it was spattered with blood, and partly because she'd never seen this many cats in it in her entire life. All of SunClan, most likely all of the rogues, and a portion of FireClan were crammed into the space. Rosethorn almost felt like she was at a Gathering. One where the truce had been broken as if it had never even existed.

It sort of helped—in a depraved way—that many of the cats weren't actually moving around, but instead laying motionless on the bare ground. A surprising amount of them were rogues, but several of them were also her Clanmates.

Her eyes landed on a cat she recognized with a jolt—the same huge tabby tom that had almost killed her twice. The first time Minnowtail had helped her, and the second time Pineclaw had saved her. Now he was grappling with Quickstorm. Her father's golden eyes glinted with rage, but his body language told her he was weakening.

With a fierce battle cry Rosethorn lunged at the tabby rogue at full speed, crashing straight into him. He hadn't seen her until it was too late, and thus wasn't at all prepared for the blow; they skidded across the ground in a writhing mass of fur and claws. When they finally stopped rolling, Rosethorn was on top, pinning him down.

The rogue's eyes lit up with recognition, and he snarled. "You just don't know when to give up, do you?"

He lifted a paw and slashed it across her ear so quickly she didn't have time to dodge. Pain lanced through Rosethorn's head, and in response she swiped her paw across his muzzle and over one of his own ears; a bit of blood sprayed from each wound. He tried to reach up to claw her again, but she was ready this time, and she batted it away. She placed a bloody paw on his neck before he could move again. He froze, staring up at her. His eyes still held the same contempt they always had, but now they were tinted with fear.

"I've really had enough of you," Rosethorn growled. And with that, she scraped her claws across his neck, tearing it open with one blow.

The rogue tom cried out and gasped, his eyes wide enough to expose the whites around the edges. Rosethorn leaped away, not wanting to be splattered with his blood, and only got a bit on the side of her face. She kept her head turned away stiffly as he bled out, making awful gurgling sounds as the life poured from him.

At last he was silent, and with an exhale Rosethorn turned to face her father. Quickstorm was watching her with narrowed, unreadable eyes, panting from exhaustion.

She risked a glance at the rogue's body, and quickly looked back at Quickstorm. "I'm sorry," she said. "If we let them go, they come back. They don't stop. This is the only way to beat them."

Quickstorm shook his head. "There's nothing to apologize for," he meowed. "They don't deserve mercy anyway. And besides, he almost killed you before."

Rosethorn blinked softly at her father. "Good luck," she breathed.

"Good luck," he echoed, and then he was gone, disappearing into the throng of battling cats. Rosethorn forced herself to turn away and find another target.

She pinpointed a she-cat that was attacking a FireClan warrior. She didn't recognize either cat, and sprang toward them without a second thought.

The rogue saw her coming and, after batting the FireClan warrior away again, reared to meet her. Rosethorn aimed a quick, unbalancing blow at her hind leg, and leaped to the side to dodge her counterattack. But it seemed the rogue had anticipated that, too; she twisted and brought her paws down on Rosethorn's spine. Rosethorn convulsed from the force of the blow and staggered sideways.

The rogue advanced on her, her eyes gleaming with just as much malice as her claws. But before she could attack again, the FireClan she-cat charged at her with a yowl and tackled her to the ground. Rosethorn joined her ally in biting and clawing at the helpless rogue, until she begged for mercy that was not given to her.

As the two she-cats backed away from the fresh corpse, the FireClan cat panted, "SunClan aren't so bad, I think. You fight well."

"The same goes for you," Rosethorn replied. "Thank you for helping us."

"Of course. You were right, you know," the she-cat added. "We don't have to be enemies. We only choose to be."

Rosethorn dipped her head in acknowledgment. Not all FireClan cats were hotheaded, she mused. "What's your name?" she asked curiously.

"Cinderlight." The FireClan she-cat's eyes gleamed. "I know yours. Good luck; you helped me, so I'll help you too, if I get the chance."

"Thank you," Rosethorn meowed again.

As Cinderlight left to find another rogue to sink her claws into, Rosethorn spun around, planning to do the same.

And her eyes landed directly on the black-and-white tom that had haunted her mind for so long.

At first, Rosethorn was so stunned she simply froze and stared at him. And he stared back. Not with the intentional malice that his eyes had always held in her imagination, but with the same look that every other rogue she'd faced had given her. For an eternal moment he was just another cat here on Zodiac's orders. For an eternal moment he was nothing to her but another rogue to rid the forest of.

And then realization slowly came down upon her like sunlight breaking through a forest canopy. *That's him. He did it all. He's right there, right in front of me. I'm not dreaming.*

I have to kill him.

An energizing fury pulsed through Rosethorn's body as the moment she had dreamed of for so, so long unfolded in front of her. The battle still raged all around them, but in this moment he was the only cat she really saw.

She started to run.

The black-and-white tom's eyes widened when he realized she was rushing him, and he spun around, prepared to flee. But Rosethorn wasn't letting him get away, not this time. She snarled and her paw flashed out on instinct, bloody claws glinting as they tore into his hind leg. He shrieked, staggering.

Rosethorn lunged downward and snatched up his injured leg, viciously sinking her teeth in. Unflinchingly, despite the rogue's agonized cries, she jerked his leg to the side, and heard a muffled *snap* as the bone broke in two.

The rogue's screams were vociferous, echoing all through her and making her ears ring, and still Rosethorn payed no real mind to what she was doing. She was on autopilot, simply channeling her

fresh feelings of rage and grief into making this cat feel more pain than she had that day. More pain than Pineclaw had felt, that day.

Just like it had in every one of her dreams, Rosethorn's vision began to cloud over in an angry red haze.

She was dully aware of her claws slashing away at whatever was within their reach—the rogue's ears, muzzle, sides, legs, tail—but she deliberately avoided any fatal spots like his throat or belly, despite them being totally exposed to her. She wanted him to feel more pain than he'd ever experienced in his life, wanted him to die slowly, wanted him to *beg* for a mercy that was just beyond his reach.

And though a small part of her knew that this slow torture was wrong, dishonorable, cruel, the rest of Rosethorn was lit up with a malicious delight. *You thought you could get away with it, didn't you?* she screamed silently. *You didn't think for a moment that someone like me would be here, remembering* exactly *what you did, tearing you to shreds for it...*

Something caught her attention. A cat crying out painfully. Not her or the victim she had pinned beneath her, but someone else. The only cat, she suspected, that had the power to drag her out of her manic state.

Nightshade.

Normally Rosethorn would have been worried that her opponent could free himself from her grasp if she got too distracted. But when she looked down, finally seeing what she'd done to him, she knew he wasn't capable of that. He was quite literally half-dead, still conscious but the life spilling out of him in thick crimson spurts. He let out low, agonized moans, his face twisted with the pain.

Bile rose in Rosethorn's throat. Wincing, she tore her gaze away from the rogue and instead looked around the battlefield, searching for Nightshade's pitch-black pelt.

She gasped as she finally caught sight of him, her heart skipping a beat. He was harshly pinned to the earth by a lithe black figure

dappled with white. *Zodiac.* The leader of the rogues was laughing, her eyes gleaming maliciously, as Nightshade struggled beneath her. She must've had a very strong grip on him; despite his size advantage against her, he just couldn't seem to get free.

Rosethorn stiffened, preparing to spring to his rescue. In any other situation she would have gone to her best friend without hesitation, but this time she glanced back down at the black-and-white tom, who was still laying helplessly beneath her, alive but the fight torn out of him.

If I go to help Nightshade, he could get away. Some rogue could take him to safety. I have waited for this chance for so long, and just like that it could get taken from me. But if I don't help him...

Rosethorn didn't know which idea was worse: letting Pineclaw's murderer get away from her, or letting Zodiac do whatever she wanted to Nightshade. Both scenarios were eating her up inside like moths devouring a leaf.

Suddenly Rosethorn had a choice to make, a choice she wouldn't have expected to make in her entire lifetime. And she simply didn't know what to do.

Chapter 54

Rosethorn's head pounded dreadfully as she stood, still pinning the black-and-white rogue but frozen to the spot. Her thoughts were filled with death and blood and cats crying out in pain. Some of the cries brought her joy; others made her wish she was the one being hurt instead of them. She could barely focus, could barely hold herself up with her legs.

In front of her, many fox-lengths away, Zodiac still had Nightshade pinned helplessly to the ground. Her paw was pressed to his throat—though her claws were sheathed—and she was hissing something to him that Rosethorn was too far away to hear. The sight made her sick. Everything she saw, from the bloodstained battlefield to the cat beneath her to her best friend a mousetail away from death, made her sick.

Adderstar's voice rang out in her head, so vivid that she almost turned to see if he was standing beside her. *Cats do unspeakable things when they are driven by grief.*

Was this the unspeakable thing she was going to do? Was she about to sacrifice the best friend she'd ever had in the name of her own revenge? Was she going to shred this cat until there was nothing left to bury, simply because she wanted to? That was the furthest thing from honorable. And willingly letting her own Clanmate die was just as disgraceful.

Rosethorn used to think that, if she didn't get to kill this rogue as he'd killed Pineclaw, she would never be able to forgive herself for it. But there was a new truth in her mind, a much different one.

If I stood by and let Zodiac murder Nightshade, I'd never forgive myself.

And just like that, the decision that had seemed impossible before now had the simplest answer. The black-and-white rogue meant nothing to Rosethorn now. All that mattered was Nightshade.

Rosethorn leapt away from the rogue's body, giving him the freedom to stand—if he even could. She refused to spare him even a glance as she moved, striding silently towards Zodiac and Nightshade so as not to alert the former that she was coming.

As she approached, she overheard the last bit of what Zodiac had been saying to Nightshade: "...with us, then you are against us. We both thought you would make a good addition to the group, but you've made your choice and there's no taking it back. Now you will suffer the consequences."

What the...? Rosethorn hardly had time to process what Zodiac was talking about before she noticed that the rogue leader's claws were now out, and pressing into Nightshade's throat. Her reflexes kicked into overdrive.

"Get away from him!" she screeched, and a heartbeat later she was flinging herself at Zodiac, tackling her off of Nightshade and driving her into the dirt. Zodiac fell with a shocked yelp, and then let out a choked gasp as she hit the ground.

She heard Nightshade's panting behind her, and turned to see him still sprawled on the ground, wide eyes glazed in shock. Zodiac's claws had pricked his neck, and beads of shiny blood formed among his dark fur.

"Nightshade!" she shouted, willing her friend to get up. "Are you okay? You have to—"

She broke off with a cry as Zodiac's paw connected with her cheek, tearing it from her eye to her jaw. Before she could retaliate, she was tossed to the side like she was nothing but a scrawny mouse. *For all her skinniness, she's still really strong!*

She scrambled to her paws just as Zodiac charged at her with a startling speed. With no time to dodge, Rosethorn simply leapt up again to meet her head-on. As they collided, Rosethorn's heavier form managed to overthrow Zodiac's, and they fell to the ground with her on top.

Snarling, Rosethorn dug her claws into her enemy; her forepaws

met in Zodiac's shoulders while her hind legs churned at her belly. Clumps of black fur tinged with white flew through the air, and Zodiac howled. She sank her teeth into one of Rosethorn's paws and wrenched it free. Fiery pain snaked up her leg, and she bit back a howl of her own.

And then Nightshade was beside them all of a sudden, his teeth bared and icy eyes narrowed to furious slits. He looked so fierce, even Rosethorn was startled. His paw whipped out and tore off the tip of Zodiac's already-scarred ear with that single swipe. Zodiac cried out again as a thin stream of bright blood sprayed from the wound. Her claws found their way into Rosethorn's soft belly, and she bit down on the same paw a second time. The agony was enough to make her stagger backwards, and the yowl she'd choked down earlier found its way to the surface again.

Zodiac was back on her feet in a matter of moments. Rosethorn rushed to stand beside Nightshade, and together they faced her. Her flank was turned toward them in a defensive position, her ears pinned back and tail lashing aggressively.

"Two against one, eh?" she hissed. "That's no problem for me."

"We'll see about that," Nightshade retorted. His tail-tip brushed over Rosethorn's hind leg, so lightly that she probably wouldn't have felt it if her senses hadn't been battle-heightened. She knew it was a signal; the two warriors lunged at Zodiac in unison, catching her off guard.

As they hit the ground lightly, Rosethorn went left while Nightshade went right. Rosethorn got one decent scratch on Zodiac's flank before the rogue she-cat spun around and slashed at her chest. She kicked out at Nightshade with her hind legs at the same time, sending him reeling backward.

She wasn't kidding when she said this was no problem for her. Rosethorn realized she was getting tired from swinging and missing over and over. Once Zodiac found her footing in a fight, she seemed to be untouchable. The rogue leader's easy agility was getting the best of her. Even when Nightshade staggered back to his feet and joined back into the fight, they weren't doing much damage.

Rosethorn wished there weren't still so many rogues; if there were enough SunClan warriors facing her, even Zodiac wouldn't stand a chance.

Just when she was beginning to wonder if this would ever end, Nightshade managed to hook his claws into the end of Zodiac's tail. The rogue she-cat shrieked—that was a sensitive spot on any cat—and stumbled to keep her balance, faltering momentarily.

Nightshade nodded urgently at Rosethorn, and she understood. *Tackle her before she regains her footing.*

And so she did, springing at Zodiac with as much strength as she could muster, hoping she would fall to the ground and stay there. The two she-cats snarled as they went down; Zodiac's snarl, however, ended with another choked cry as the breath was driven out of her.

Rosethorn clawed at her muzzle, her chest, her shoulders and flanks, viciously tearing her open in as many places as possible. Just like she'd done with the rogue, but this time she was in control. She knew exactly what she was doing, and was certain that there was nothing wrong with it. While the black-and-white rogue had been responsible for one thing, Zodiac was responsible for *everything*. And right now she was paying for her actions.

At last Zodiac seemed to fall limp beneath the blows that rained down upon her, her eyes defeatedly fluttering shut. Rosethorn ceased her attacks, panting furiously, and glanced over her shoulder at Nightshade, who was standing close by in case his help was needed. *It definitely wasn't,* she thought darkly.

Her best friend nodded once. "Finish it," he growled. "She could still be alive."

Rosethorn returned the nod and turned back to Zodiac. Her body was torn up by ugly scratch marks, and every visible white patch on her body was stained with red. Her eyes were still closed. The only thing left to do with her was to deliver the killing blow and put her out of her misery.

Rosethorn raised a claw-spiked forepaw. It was her only white paw —the only white mark on her whole body, in fact—and was also vividly bloodstained as a result.

Just as she brought her paw down, slicing into Zodiac's throat, a sudden, almost unbearable pain cut into her stomach. She felt like she was back in the burning forest, leaping over the fire on the fallen tree, the heat of it searing her skin. But this was much more than a sear—this was scorching her from the inside out.

"Rosethorn, *no*!" Nightshade cried, at the same time she tossed her head back and shrieked, just barely keeping herself upright through the agony. Slowly, her teeth gritted, she looked down again.

Zodiac's eyes were wide open.

Her spotted paws were digging into Rosethorn's belly, the source of the horrible pain. Blood came in spurts from the wound in her neck, pooling below her with all the other blood she'd lost. Her mouth hung open, and her golden eyes were dull. But they were wide open all the same.

Her final words came in a raspy exhale; they were the last spark of fight in a cat who had no fight left in them.

"What we have done can never be undone."

Her paws fell from Rosethorn's belly as she died, her eyes glazing over with that telltale blank look, but never closing. Somehow Rosethorn thought that was fitting for her. Leaving this world with her eyes wide open, confident and alert even in the face of death.

As she staggered backward and away from Zodiac's corpse, she felt warm liquid spilling over her paws. It took her several heartbeats to register that it was her own blood, pulsing steadily from the brutal wound on her stomach.

She was aware of Nightshade beside her, desperately saying her name and telling her that he would go find Dawnfire or Grayleaf and that she would be okay soon. The only response she could muster was a pained whimper, and she hated herself for it. She

wanted to tell him that, no matter what happened to her, everything would be okay and that they were strong enough to deal with it. But she simply couldn't find the strength to say it.

Suddenly she couldn't find the strength to do anything, and her legs buckled. As she collapsed, Nightshade's cries echoed through her head. All the words she wanted so badly to say to him died on her lips as the world went black.

* * *

"Rosethorn. Wake up. We have to talk."

The first thought Rosethorn had as her consciousness returned was that she'd been so certain she wouldn't hear his voice again until many, many moons in the future. And yet she could've sworn on StarClan that he was here, right beside her, gently urging her to wake up.

With a pounding heart she opened her eyes. And sure enough, there was Pineclaw, standing over her, gazing at her with that petal-soft look that always told her he would have been hers for seasons upon seasons if he'd had the chance. His pelt shimmered with bits of starlight, lighting up his already-beautiful dark red fur. He looked nothing like he had the last time she'd dared to look at him, when he was bruised and bloody and sickeningly still.

"You can stand," he murmured. "Your injuries are gone for the moment."

He was right; Rosethorn's body was devoid of any of the pain she'd felt the last time she was conscious. Unbearably curious, she pulled herself to her paws and looked around.

She was standing in a small, luscious forest clearing. A barrier of tall ferns surrounded it, and beyond that were seemingly endless trees that morphed into enticing shadows. At the very center of the clearing sat a round pool of crystal-clear water that rippled slightly in the calm, warm breeze.

Her stomach tightened at the beautiful and unfamiliar sight. She

looked to Pineclaw, who still hadn't taken his eyes off of her.

"This is StarClan, isn't it?" she guessed.

Pineclaw nodded.

Rosethorn's voice dropped to a whisper. "Am I dead?"

Please, I don't want to die yet. There's so much I need to say to Nightshade, and Dawnfire, and Patchflower and Quickstorm. Acornpaw still needs her mentor. And I want to ask Shadowpool if he saw Minnowtail anywhere, and if he knows what happened to her in the battle. And SunClan must have already lost so many warriors. I want to be there with them, and I want to help rebuild everything that we've lost. They need me now more than...

Pineclaw shook his head. "No. You are in StarClan, but not permanently. Part of your spirit is simply residing here while Grayleaf and Dawnfire heal your wounds. Just enough of you is still there to keep you from staying here forever."

"So I'm...*half*-dead."

"You could say that."

Pineclaw's tone was slightly wry, and suddenly Rosethorn's heart began to ache with a bittersweet pain. It was much more bearable than the pain from the wound in her belly, but it was still pain.

"I don't think you'll ever know how much I've missed you," she breathed. "Just being able to *look* at you again...it's all I've really wanted for such a long time."

Pineclaw blinked softly at her. His voice was barely audible as he responded, "Not anymore. There are many other things you want more, now."

Before Rosethorn could ask him what exactly he meant, he swept on.

"I haven't taken my eyes off you since you traveled to the Twolegplace to find out if the rogues started the forest fire. I had no

control over anything that happened, but watching you gave me the feeling that I was still around, still there to protect you, and that nothing bad would happen to you as long as I was watching over you. And...well, that feeling wasn't true, but I think the fact that you get to live is good enough."

Rosethorn's head tilted a little. "But wouldn't you be happy if I joined you in StarClan?" she asked.

"Would *you* have been happy if you'd died?" Pineclaw meowed.

Rosethorn answered without a moment's hesitation. "No."

"Then I wouldn't have been happy, either," Pineclaw said, "because knowing you're happy is what makes me happy. And if you're upset, so am I. Besides, you have so much more to live for than to die for. And I'm not worth all those things."

Rosethorn wanted to say that he was, that he always had been and always would be, but found that she couldn't. And deep down she knew he was right.

"I want you to live as long of a life as you can," Pineclaw went on. "You deserve a long, happy life. And now that Zodiac is dead, now that all the rogues are either dead or long gone, I think you can finally have that."

"The remaining rogues fled?" Rosethorn mewed. "How many were left? Are they really gone for good?"

"There weren't many left—ten or eleven at the most, and most of them were badly injured. Minnowtail was one of the escapees, and so was Bat."

"Bat?"

"That's the name of the rogue who killed me."

"Oh." *Bat.* Rosethorn wondered idly if it was the name he'd been born with, or if he'd been a kittypet before and changed his name. "So he survived."

"He did." Pineclaw stared hard at her. "Even after the beating he took from you."

Rosethorn ducked her head, ashamed of her cruel actions. StarClan hadn't sent her those dreams just to warn her of what would happen to Pineclaw. They'd also been warning her of what her grief would make her capable of. *Cats do unspeakable things when they are driven by grief.*

"I'm sorry," she meowed quietly. "I lost control. I always lose control."

"But you got it back eventually," replied Pineclaw. "Nightshade snapped you out of it."

"He did," Rosethorn murmured. "I realized he needed me right then more than I ever needed revenge. I didn't even really *need* revenge; it was just something I kept telling myself. Thinking that Bat would pay for your death helped me cope with my grief, but actually making him pay didn't help. If anything, it made things worse. I...I don't know what would've happened if Nightshade hadn't cried out at that moment."

Pineclaw stepped closer to her. His scent, something she remembered all too well, wafted lazily around her. "You're still a good cat," he reminded her. "You always have been, no matter what. And I'm not mad at you for anything you did. In fact, I'm *proud* of you for choosing to save Nightshade over killing Bat."

"I'd always choose Nightshade," blurted Rosethorn. She stiffened as the words flew out, but relaxed again when they incited no visible reaction from Pineclaw. Quieter she added, "If I could do all of that again, I wouldn't change a single thing."

Pineclaw's expression softened further. His whiskers twitched with mild amusement. "I know how you feel about him," he said after a moment.

All Rosethorn could do was sigh, and she was silent for a long time.

"Pineclaw, I'm sorry..."

"No. Don't be sorry." Pineclaw's voice was gentle but firm, the way he'd always talk to her while they were training. "I'm happy for you, really. The fact that you were able to move on from me shows just how strong you've become. Even after everything you've been through, you can still find it in your heart to love this way, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

Rosethorn felt warmth blooming in her chest. This was why she loved Pineclaw—he was one of the most understanding cats she'd ever known. And despite her change of heart with Nightshade, there would always be a tiny part of her that would never stop loving him.

Change of heart. Suddenly she asked Pineclaw, "What do I do? He already thinks I'll never love him. How do I tell him that I do?"

"Just say it," Pineclaw mewed. "Even after that fight you two had, he never stopped waiting for you. He still is. He wants nothing more than your love."

"Do you think he'll believe me?" Rosethorn whispered.

"I *know* he'll believe you," answered Pineclaw. "Because it's true. He's known you long enough to know when you're lying. And he'll love you back, just as he always has."

Rosethorn lowered her head, taking another deep breath and willing herself to believe it. *I don't think I could take it if I confessed, but he didn't love me back anymore.*

"If none of this had ever happened...if you'd survived..." She lifted her eyes again. "Would I still feel this way about him? It doesn't seem like it. If you'd lived, I wouldn't have had a chance to feel like this."

"I don't think that's true." Pineclaw rasped his tongue over his shoulder a few times. "Even if I'd survived, eventually you would have began to realize something was off. Ever since Nightshade taught you the hunting crouch when he was an apprentice, and you were just a kit, your love for him was blooming slowly. All I did was mask those feelings, but that mask would have faded even if I

had lived. You belong with Nightshade, more than you ever would've belonged with me."

Rosethorn knew there wasn't a hair on her former mentor's pelt that resented the words he spoke. *He really does believe I'll be happier with Nightshade. Did StarClan* destine *things to be this way?* she wondered. *Dawnfire was right. StarClan does work in mysterious ways...*

"It is time for you to wake up, and return to the cats who need you," Pineclaw averred. "I give you a message as you leave—not an omen or a prophecy, but simply my advice."

Darkness began to press in on Rosethorn's vision, but it was more comforting than anything else. As her eyes began to close, she heard Pineclaw speak one last time; his voice sounded like an echo in her own mind. almost as if his words were her own thoughts.

Turn your eyes to the living, for th ey are where you will find true happiness.

The last thing Rosethorn felt before the quiet darkness fell over her was the fond, familiar flick of a tail-tip over her ear.

Chapter 55

The fallout of the battle with the rogues was unimaginable.

Dawnfire had never seen so many horribly injured cats in one place, let alone *dead* cats. While a good portion of them were rogues, many of them were also SunClan. Her heart had shattered as she'd recognized each one in the aftermath: Deerdapple, Robinfeather, Forestfire, Cherryfur, Ashwhisker, Thumpstep, and Fernstripe. And, of course, Rainfoot, who might very well have been the first cat to die.

None of the FireClan cats that had assisted in the battle—cats that Rosethorn and Hazelfrost had brought—had been killed, but they all had their own injuries too; some minor, some more serious. Nonetheless, Adderstar had formally thanked Amberstar for choosing to help them, and had promised that SunClan was in their debt.

And, had Rosethorn been well enough to leave the medicine den, Dawnfire was sure he would have thanked her too. After all, according to Hazelfrost, it had been Rosethorn's idea to get help from FireClan in the first place. Her quick thinking and persuasion of Amberstar had saved SunClan from extinction.

The Clan had been in ruins after the ordeal, from the camp to the cats themselves. The apprentices—none of which had died—had all been utterly devastated when Birchpelt told them of their mother's death. He'd told them she went peacefully, but that didn't seem to help much. Thumpstep's death had shocked all the senior warriors, and the loss of two elders had been very hard, for Brokenstem in particular.

It had now been two sunrises since the tragedy, and things were healing, but slowly. Grayleaf and Dawnfire were working themselves to the bone, making sure SunClan didn't lose any more cats. The cats with the fewest injuries had all volunteered to go out hunting as much as they can, finding what little prey was left.

Adderstar was doing his best to keep everyone calm and focused on rebuilding what they had lost. Some cats had wanted to go and make sure the rogues had truly gone, but Adderstar was certain that Zodiac's death caused them all to scatter. And even if they hadn't, SunClan still needed to recuperate before they took action.

Dawnfire was now laying awake in her nest, letting herself have a bit of time to think before she began the morning's work. Grayleaf was still fast asleep in the nest beside hers, snoring softly.

She found that her thoughts were drawn back to Zodiac's death. A flashback played vividly in her mind, not for the first time.

She'd been beside Grayleaf, tending to Brokenstem, who'd torn out a claw while fighting a rogue that was trying to get behind the elders den, where Rainfoot had died. Nightshade had ran up to them in a panicked frenzy. Dawnfire hadn't really been able to understand what he was saying, but she heard the words "injured" and "Rosethorn." She'd raced away to find her sister before Nightshade could even finish speaking.

The rest was a blur now, and frankly Dawnfire was glad about that. She didn't want to think about what her sister had looked like when she'd found her.

According to Nightshade, Rosethorn had killed Zodiac, but the rogue she-cat had severely wounded her in her final moments. She'd whispered something to Rosethorn that he hadn't heard, and then fell limp with death, her eyes clouding over. Rosethorn had passed out from blood loss not long after.

Dawnfire thanked StarClan every moment of her life that her sister had pulled through. She'd woken up late into the first day after the battle—and had been uncharacteristically desperate to speak to Nightshade. He'd been asleep when she'd awoken, so she hadn't been able to talk to him. Rosethorn had seemed both disappointed and relieved at the same time, and had gone back to sleep without saying another word. Even now Dawnfire was still puzzled by this. *I wonder if she's gotten to talk to Nightshade yet. She seemed restless about it.*

She heard the soft rustling of moss outside the crevice the medicine cats slept in, and prepared to rise and check on whoever had woken up. But a hushed voice stopped her in her tracks. It was Rosethorn.

"Nightshade, are you awake?"

There was another rustling sound. Then Nightshade answered dryly, "I am now."

"Oops. Sorry," Rosethorn snickered. "I couldn't get back to sleep. I'm going stir-crazy in here."

"Tell me about it," Nightshade agreed. "And Brokenstem's snoring woke me up in the middle of the night. He sleeps like a log!"

The two cats shared a laugh, and Dawnfire twitched her whiskers with amusement.

"At learns that means he's sleeping well," Rosethorn pointed out. "I can't imagine what he's going through, losing two cats he spent his whole life with. Just getting through each day must be tough."

Nightshade murmured sympathetic agreement. Then there was a stretched-out, slightly awkward silence. Dawnfire waited, curious about whether they were going to say anything else.

At last Rosethorn meowed, "Do you want to go outside and get some fresh air? We could talk without waking anyone and getting our ears slashed."

"I don't know." Nightshade sounded worried. "Are you sure you can walk without reopening your stomach wound?"

"Honestly, I'm okay. Grayleaf and my sister have done a great job. And it's not like we're going for a run in the forest. We're only sitting outside."

Rosethorn sounded like her usual prideful, indignant self. Dawnfire was also a little concerned about her opening up her wounds again —especially the one on her belly, on which the dark scab was still very tender. But some intuition told her not to interfere, that something good was going to happen if she stayed out of this. So

she laid still, and waited.

"You'd better not be lying," Nightshade replied. "Alright, let's go. You can lean on me, and we'll walk slowly."

"Whatever you say," Rosethorn grunted. Dawnfire heard them getting up slowly and quietly leaving the medicine den.

I'll sit just inside the entrance and listen. Dawnfire knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help herself. And the last time she'd overheard a conversation between her sister and Nightshade, it had been when the latter had stopped being friends with her. She wanted to be here for Rosethorn in case something bad like that happened again. *And in case she opens her wound again. Careless furball.*

Silently she crept out of the sleeping crevice and into the main part of the den. Injured and dozing cats lined the wall on her left—she and Grayleaf had shaped extra nests to accommodate all their patients. And this still wasn't all of them; those who weren't injured as badly had taken to sleeping in their usual places.

Already she could hear Rosethorn's idle voice. "Wow, it's definitely a nice morning. I think we caught the best part of the sunrise."

"You're right," Nightshade agreed. "I bet the dawn patrol is enjoying the view—well, outside of the...horribly scorched forest."

Rosethorn snorted. "Yeah, that does kind of ruin it. But at least it'll all grow back within a moon or two. Newleaf isn't too far off."

"Can you imagine what Adderstar will have to say at the next Gathering to explain all this?" Nightshade said.

"That's going to be brutal," Rosethorn replied. "He'll have to talk about how the rogues had a vendetta against us, how they started the fire, the battle...I'm honestly glad to be sitting this one out because of my injuries. I wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut, which you know is never a good thing."

Nightshade laughed a little, but it died away quickly. When he spoke again, his tone was quiet and hesitant. Dawnfire pricked her

ears. "Speaking of vendettas...did you see that black-and-white cat that...that killed Pineclaw?"

"Bat," Rosethorn blurted. "His name is Bat."

"Bat?" Nightshade echoed. "How did you find that out?"

"Oh...I saw some rogue call out to him during the battle." Dawnfire immediately wondered what her sister was hiding; she wasn't sure if Nightshade knew she was lying, too.

"So he *was* part of the battle," Nightshade mewed. "And you said *is* instead of *was*, so I'm guessing he's still alive?"

"Yeah." Rosethorn sounded a little uncomfortable. "I attacked him, but...I saw Zodiac about to kill you, and I let him go to save you."

Dawnfire was stunned. She'd had no idea that Zodiac had almost killed Nightshade. Or that Rosethorn had sacrificed the revenge she'd been yearning for for ages to save her best friend.

"You...let him *go*?" Nightshade sounded incredulous. "But you've wanted him dead for so long. You had a chance to kill him."

"I couldn't just let you die!" Rosethorn protested. "Do you really think I could've done that to you? To *myself*? You're..."

"I'm your best friend, I know." Nightshade suddenly sounded curt, though he seemed to be trying hard to sound casual. Dawnfire winced. *Don't bring this up to her again*, she pleaded silently.

But Rosethorn's response was not what she'd expected. "That's not what I was going to say, actually," she meowed. "You're...well, you *are* my best friend, but you mean *so much more* to me than that. I didn't realize it before, when I was still grieving for Pineclaw, but I know now. I let Bat go because your life means more to me than his death ever could. Watching Pineclaw die was really, *really* hard on me. But watching *you* die is something I know I wouldn't be able to bear. Outside of my family, you're the first friend I ever had, and you've always been there to support me however you can—through the good times and the bad.

"I was blind to the real meaning behind everything you've done for me, because I believed I was in love with someone else, with Pineclaw. And, granted, I might have been, but I know I love you more than I loved him. But my own feelings were hidden to me, up until now."

Dawnfire's heart was racing with a startling excitement. She waited with bated breath for her sister's next words.

"I love you, Nightshade," Rosethorn whispered. "I always have. And I'm sorry you had to wait this long to hear that. That's on me. I should've realized before. And if you've lost your feelings for me in that way, I understand..."

"What? No!" Nightshade gasped, cutting her off. "Of *course* I haven't lost those feelings. And you don't need to apologize for anything. I would've waited my whole life to hear you say that if I had to; it wouldn't lose any meaning to me. I don't know who I'd be if I'd never fallen in love with you. I...I love you too, Rosethorn."

And Dawnfire could tell that, for the first time in his life, he wasn't afraid to say it.

"Thank StarClan for that," Rosethorn breathed, obviously relieved that her previous rejection of Nightshade hadn't come full circle. The elation in her sister's voice made Dawnfire feel warm inside.

After all this time, she's finally gotten what she wanted: a love that will last.

Suddenly and acutely aware that she was eavesdropping on a private moment, Dawnfire slunk back to her nest and curled up, barely able to contain her happiness.

* * *

Dawnfire had managed to fall back asleep, and was walking through a dream. She was on a wide-open hillside, the grass pale green beneath her and the night sky a beautiful dark violet above her. Glittering stars winked down at her, and the quarter moon lit her path just enough. Other than the crickets chirping idly nearby,

the night was silent.

A cat stood at the top of the hill, almost hidden in the shadow of the large birch tree that stood beside it. Its back was to Dawnfire. She couldn't see the color of its fur, either; she wasn't sure who the cat was.

Perhaps it's Violetsky, she mused. *After all, we* are *beneath her namesake right now.*

As Dawnfire came closer to the cat, it lifted its tail and turned. Beautiful blue eyes glowed from its face, and she immediately knew it was indeed Violetsky.

"You are truly a gifted medicine cat," the StarClan she-cat murmured. "Not many would be able to cope with the things that have tormented your Clan."

"Grayleaf is coping just as well as I am," Dawnfire pointed out.

"She is also gifted. And she has passed down those gifts to you." Violetsky turned away again, lifting her head to gaze up at the stars. "But that is not what matters right now. I have something to tell you, Dawnfire."

"What's that?" Dawnfire would have been nervous, if not for the breathless joy that Violetsky expressed when she spoke. *This is good news. Finally!*

Violetsky closed her eyes. An invisible weight seemed to lift off of her shoulders. "Sunstar's prophecy has been fulfilled," she purred. "I feel it in my heart; every cat in StarClan can feel it. SunClan can live in peace at last."

Dawnfire felt her own invisible weight rise into the sky, higher and higher until it had vanished for good. *Sunstar's prophecy has been fulfilled. SunClan can live in peace at last.*

"Do you know what it means?" she gasped. "The prophecy? If you felt it as it was fulfilled, then surely you must know what it means." *I've heard it too many times*, she added silently, *for it to be fulfilled without me even knowing what it meant!*

"Actually, I do," Violetsky meowed pensively. "*Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun*. Sunstar was indeed cryptic with this message. Cryptic enough that even StarClan themselves—who are known for never being obvious—could not figure out what he meant. But now that the answer is clear, it makes so much sense. It seems so simple to understand, now, but before it seemed impossible."

"Tell me what it meant," Dawnfire pleaded, feeling strangely like a kit begging her littermate to play with her.

Violetsky's eyes sparkled with the light of the stars as she gazed back at her.

"The key to the prophecy was your sister," she averred. "*Rosethorn* was the bloodstained flower all along."

And, just like she'd said before, all of a sudden it seemed so obvious to Dawnfire.

Only a bloodstained flower can save the sun. From birth, Rosethorn had been named after a flower—one that was typically red, at that. And everything that she'd done to save SunClan, from convincing FireClan to help them to killing Zodiac herself, she'd done with her fur stained with blood—that of other cats, and her own. Her heroic actions had indeed saved the sun, which had meant SunClan.

Dawnfire suddenly recalled one of her dreams about the prophecy, in which a single rose had somehow driven the fire away and restored the forest to its former beauty. *That was a dead giveaway*, she realized, *and I still never pieced it together!*

And in that moment Dawnfire had never been more proud of her sister. Rosethorn had been special enough to have the main role in a prophecy created by SunClan's first ever leader. And she had done exactly what she'd been destined to do. Without her, SunClan would have been annihilated, because the prophecy had said *only* she could do it.

"Should I tell her?" Dawnfire asked hoarsely. "Should I tell her about what she really did?"

Violetsky shook her head slowly. "She may have been prophesied, but it doesn't mean she needs to know. The only cats you need to tell are Grayleaf—of course—and Adderstar. And I know they will both be ecstatic to know that their Clan's turmoil is finally over."

Dawnfire nodded. It sounded reasonable to her. Besides, she wasn't sure Rosethorn would even believe her if she tried to explain it all to her. She could almost hear her sister's dubious snort now: *Did you eat a bad mouse last night? There's no way I'm* that *special. I'm just a warrior like all the others.*

"I'll tell them," she promised Violetsky. After a long moment she added warmly, "I don't think I've really thanked you for guiding me through this. I know you say I'm strong by myself—and maybe you're right—but I know I couldn't have made it to the light at the end of this long tunnel without you. You've helped me more than words could ever express, and I'll always be grateful for that. So thank you, Violetsky."

To her surprise, Violetsky dipped her head to her in a respectful manner—something she felt *she* should have been doing instead. "It was an honor to stand by you," the StarClan spirit responded. "And don't think that this is the last you'll see of me. I'll be appearing in many more of your dreams and visions in the future. These troubles may have brought us together, but the absence of them will not tear us apart."

Good, Dawnfire thought happily. *I would've really missed her if she'd stopped visiting me. Violetsky is a wonderful cat.*

"I must go now," Violetsky mewed. "I promised Frecklefur we'd go for a walk and look for some herbs that are harder to find. I will see you at the next half-moon meeting!"

Dawnfire recalled that Frecklefur had been Violetsky's medicine cat apprentice, and blinked warmly. "Until the meeting, then!"

She watched Violetsky turn around and run gracefully down the other side of the hill. In the distance there was a lush forest, which was likely where the StarClan she-cat was headed. Her shape quickly got smaller with the distance, until she was but a blur on

the horizon.

Unlike the rest of her dreams, Dawnfire didn't feel anything compelling her to wake up just yet. And so she simply sat there at the top of the hill, beneath the flawless night sky, basking in the sense of everlasting peace that had crept over her.

Epilogue

The following greenleaf...

"Come on now, kits," Rosethorn called encouragingly, standing outside the nursery. "It's beautiful outside! Don't you want to come and see?"

As her words were met with a stubborn silence, Nightshade's ear twitched wryly. He was beside her, his tail comfortably entwined with hers. "I think they know that half the Clan is watching for them," he commented.

Rosethorn huffed with good-humored frustration. She'd promised the Clan that she would coax her kits to take their first pawsteps outside the nursery. But Applekit, Poppykit and Graykit didn't seem like they'd be coming out anytime soon.

"Okay, this isn't working," announced Acornfall, who was one of many cats eagerly gathered by the nursery. "I'm going in. They'll come out if I coax them." She marched toward the entrance to the den.

"What makes you so sure of that?" Crowpelt meowed after her. Flashfoot and Leafwhisker flanked him; all three cats were watching their confident sister with doubting expressions.

Acornfall snorted. "Have you *seen* me play with those kits? They love me!" To Rosethorn and Nightshade she added, "Don't worry, I've got this."

"Oh, I'm sure you do," Rosethorn responded dryly as her former apprentice trotted cheerfully into the nursery.

She saw a cat approaching her at the edge of her vision, and glanced over. Dawnfire was padding up to her. "Any luck?" her sister prompted.

Rosethorn shook her head. "Nope. Those kits are rooted to the nursery floor. They might as well be trees."

"Acornfall went inside," Nightshade chimed in. "She thinks she can get them to come out."

Dawnfire laughed. "Well, they *are* pretty fond of her. It could work."

"We're their parents," Rosethorn chuckled, "and even we couldn't get them to come out! How would Acornfall do any..."

She trailed off as Acornfall emerged from the nursery, her fire-colored eyes glowing triumphantly. Behind her were three tiny bundles of fur. In the lead was Poppykit; she was a perfect mix of her parents, with Nightshade's fur and Rosethorn's eyes. Then came Graykit; she looked strangely similar to Grayleaf, and thus had been named after her. Nobody was sure where that came from. And at the rear was Applekit. His ginger-and-white pelt slightly resembled his mother's, though tortoiseshell toms were almost unheard of. All three kits looked daunted and excited at the same time.

"What did I tell you?" Acornfall purred smugly. "Admit it, you're a *little* impressed."

Flashfoot cuffed her over the ear as she came back to stand beside him. Rosethorn and Nightshade rolled their eyes simultaneously, and padded up to their kits.

Poppykit was staring at the small crowd of cats nervously. "Why are they all looking at us?" she squeaked.

Nightshade bent down and brushed his cheek over the little she-kit's face. "They're just excited to see you out of the nursery for the first time," he soothed. "Nothing to be scared of."

Rosethorn watched her mate warmly. Nightshade had been happier than she'd ever seen him before when they'd found out she was expecting kits. And now he was the best father to them that she could've asked for.

She remembered the first couple of days after the three kits had been born. She and Nightshade hadn't thought about what to name

them until they laid their eyes on them. Before Applekit had been named, Dawnfire suggested naming him Pinekit, in memory of Pineclaw. Nightshade—after a moment's hesitation—had agreed, saying it was a good idea.

Rosethorn had refused.

Poppykit relaxed visibly. The nervous look in her green eyes faded into curiosity, and she started to walk around clumsily. Her siblings tentatively followed suit, their noses and ears twitching madly. The Clan watched them fondly as they explored.

Rosethorn watched her kits, Nightshade and Dawnfire flanking her. *How could one cat be capable of loving this much?* she asked herself euphorically.

Silently she thanked StarClan for letting her have the kind of life she'd always dreamed of. It was like a light at the end of the tunnel—the longest, darkest tunnel she could imagine. All that pain and trouble and grief had paid off at last.

The rogues were long gone, taking Bat with them. Rosethorn was okay with that. They'd taken Minnowtail with them, too. Rosethorn had a good feeling that this was the last they'd ever see of the cunning silver she-cat. She had a new life now, a chosen family. And though she couldn't think of a reason Minnowtail would choose heartless rogues over her birth Clan, she suspected her former Clanmate was perfectly happy with her decision.

Let her be happy where she is. As long as she doesn't come back to threaten us again. She tried not to let her mind linger on Minnowtail's promise to kill her.

Pulling herself out of her thoughts, Rosethorn leaned against Nightshade. His black fur absorbed the sun's warmth like the earth absorbed water, and she relished the feeling. Despite the warmth, she still had to stifle a shiver as she felt Nightshade lean in too, gently resting his head atop hers.

She noticed out of the corner of her eye that Dawnfire watching them—specifically her—though she didn't turn to look directly at

her. She could feel her sister's eyes; it was a look she didn't quite understand, pride mixed with awe. She'd seen Dawnfire look at her like that a lot when she thought she wasn't paying attention.

It's like she knows something about me that I don't. It always bewildered Rosethorn, but she knew better than to ask about it. Dawnfire was a tricky one when it came to secrets, especially since she was a medicine cat.

Besides, now she had more pressing things to worry about than her sister's occasional staring. Like making sure her curious kits didn't sneak out of camp now that they'd left the nursery. *We're not repeating the incident with Acornfall and her littermates!*

So instead she sighed contentedly, simply enjoying the moment as Graykit snuck up behind Poppykit and placed a leaf on her head. Poppykit instantly shook her head vigorously, dislodging the leaf, and growled playfully at her sister. They began chasing each other around the clearing while Applekit crept up to the leaf and pounced on it clumsily.

"It was worth it," she murmured to Nightshade before she even realized she was speaking.

Her mate didn't move, but she could sense his curiosity. "What was?" he asked.

Rosethorn closed her eyes. "Everything."

* * *

If you've made it all the way to the end of this very long fic, THANK YOU. You're absolutely incredible, and I appreciate every single one of you. You all made this story special by giving it a shot.

On that note, if you enjoyed this, I have also written a novella within the same Warriors universe. It tells Minnowtail's side of the story regarding her betrayal of SunClan—I'm sure many of you are wondering what exactly drove her to do it! The novella, Minnowtail's Choice, can be found on my profile page

if you're interested. I promise it's way shorter than this monster of a fic.

Again, thank you all so very much! <333